

The First Commandment

Prof. George Nathan Schlesinger

Maimonides, echoing the first of the Ten Commandments writes, "The foremost commandment is to believe in the Holy One blessed be He." However, in his Collected Essays, Rabbi Elchonon Wassermann, poses the famous question: What is the point in ordering the incredible to believe? Those who deny the presence of a Supreme Being in our universe are in turn denying the existence of One with the authority and power to issue commands!

Rabbi Wassermann offers a radical solution to the problem by stating emphatically that there is no such thing as an "honest atheist." He insists that as a matter of fact religious faith is deeply embedded in everyone's heart. The denial of a Divine Creator is invariably the result of the willful suppression of a belief that an individual has set his mind upon eradicating.

Many have found Reb Elchonon's assertion bewildering. Is it possible that those who have earnestly debated all the aspects of Emunah (faith), read widely, argued with themselves and others, and after years of painstaking thought arrived at the conclusion that they are incapable of accepting the basic tenets of Judaism, are nothing more than victims of self-deception? I should like to devote the rest of this essay to rendering Rabbi Wassermann's idea clearer and more palatable.

As a preliminary, we will have to digress briefly and examine the prohibition against propagating falsehood. The Torah expresses the injunction against deception in an unusual way. Generally interdictions begin with the words "Thou shalt not." In this unique context the Torah says, "Keep far away from falsehood" (Exod. 23:7), the implication being that we are required not merely to refrain from actual lying but also to avoid coming anywhere close to doing so. We are to avoid all speech and action that may have misleading consequences.

The following will illustrate the great distance one is supposed to keep from anything that smacks of dishonesty:

1-The Code of Jewish law (Choshen Mishpat, 228:5) says that a merchant is not permitted to paint used items which might as a result seem like new.

We note that the rule to adhere to the truth extends to situations where one does not even utter a single word.

2- The creation of a false impression is similarly forbidden in situations which have no connection to either money or business — A person is not allowed to invite someone to dinner if they already know that he or she will not or cannot accept the invitation. The reason: I must not dishonestly acquire my friend's gratitude.

3- Rabbi Z. Pliskin relates a moving incident which illustrates the length to which some meticulous individuals have gone to remain outside the range of deceptive behavior. The story concerns the eminent Rabbi R. Levenstein of Bnei Brak. Among his many other accomplishments R. Levenstein was a very powerful orator. When in 1952 R. Isaac Sher, the famous Mussar exponent, passed away they asked R. Levenstein to deliver the eulogy. Unfortunately, on the very same day he also received a message from the U.S. that one of his grandchildren had died. The eulogy for R. Sher was delivered, but contrary to what people expected, R. Levenstein shed no tears. He later explained, "Had I cried, I would have



cried bitterly because of the death of my grandson. The listeners would have mistakenly thought that I was crying on account of R. Sher's passing. I had to restrain myself so as not to create a false impression in the mind of my audience."

Why was it thought necessary to mandate such extraordinary measures to separate us from falsehood, even those of the most harmless nature? The answer is that untruths which cause no harm to others may still cause much harm to oneself. Let me explain. It has been universally recognized that one of the most menacing dangers which threatens all human beings is that of falling victim to self-deception. "We are never deceived, we deceive ourselves," said the poet Goethe. As a rule we are capable of guarding ourselves against those who attempt to befool us, but we are far less successful against our own

attempts, since it is those which we do not wish to resist. Thus, over two thousand years ago the Greek orator, Demosthenes said, "The easiest thing is to deceive oneself: for what a man wishes he generally believes to be true." Consider, for instance, the bizarre attitude of the many highly intelligent and educated people who expected universal redemption to come from the USSR during the thirties. In their fervent desire to believe in the ultimate goodness of Communism they managed to convince themselves that the victims of the Moscow purges were actually guilty of the grotesque assortment of

In Aesop's story about the shepherd who cried wolf we are shown that a liar's punishment is that in the end he will be disbelieved even when he is telling the truth. In fact however, there is a much more severe punishment at hand: because of his neglect to stand guard against falsehood, he himself will lose his grip on reality and will no longer be able to differentiate between truth and untruth.

A noted Rabbi was once asked for a referral concerning a person whom he knew to be a compulsive liar. The Rabbi was almost physically incapable of speaking ill of anyone. At the same time, he

mind, to the point where he himself believed more or less what he said - he practically "remembered" events that never took place.

Our only protection therefore to ensure that we are capable of discriminating between the authentic and the counterfeit is to adamantly avoid sham in all its forms and to shun anything that does not fully correspond to facts.

This then is the reason for the arduous effort we are bid to make to avoid anything at all that may in any manner distort the way things are. Thus the instruction in the Psalms is to "speak the truth in one's heart" meaning, to acknowledge to oneself one's wishes, fears and aspirations, and most importantly, to get a firm hold on reality, and not to mistake the fictions conjured up by our imaginations, for facts.

According to Reb Elchonon, as indeed according to all devout believers, the countless wonders of nature we find all around us speak clearly and loudly of a Divine Creator. Only an individual who is bent upon casting off the yoke of the Torah, who in conscience has become so bleary eyed as to overlook the distinction between truth and its opposite, could be taken in by the arguments fabricated in support of agnosticism. Admittedly, the disbeliever cannot be commanded to believe in what he regards as incredulous. But truly, there are no disbelievers. According to Reb Elchonon there are no honest skeptics, only individuals who have managed to hide away their religious beliefs in some of the out-of-the-way recesses of their minds. We are therefore enjoined to get rid of the various obstacles blocking our view, which prevent us from seeing things as they actually are. We are told to resist the forces that tend to distort our vision and befog our thoughts, for then the true picture is bound to emerge fully. Those who assiduously pursue soundness and justness under all circumstances, and who avoid straying a single snip from the straight path, are most likely to enjoy freedom from gnawing doubts and to achieve full harmony between their professed and subconscious beliefs. Professor George Nathan Schlesinger, is a professor of Science and Logic at the University of North Carolina where he has taught for the last 24 years.

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charges fabricated against them. At the time there were many whose wishful thinking was overpowering enough to render the most unacceptable, acceptable as long as it remained in line with their ideology.

He who indulges in the practise of fraud will eventually be unable to see the line separating truth from untruth and will end up defrauding himself. The consequences of self-deception are very often damaging. They may include the pursuit of phantasmal objectives, the adoption of ignoble ambitions, the support of unworthy causes, the assumption of false roles, and ultimately the living of altogether false lives.

knew that the community depended on his report. It is said that finally he came up with the following: he pointed out that not everyone possesses the same faculties of memory. Some people can remember events that took place two or three years ago while others are able to recall clearly the events of 10 or 20 years previously. "The individual whose candidacy is being considered has such an extraordinary memory that he remembers even things that have never happened!"

The Rabbi's intention was not just to crack a joke; it was to mitigate the candidate's vice. He could no longer be said to be willfully distorting reality: facts and fantasy were genuinely mixed up in his

Witnessing the Giving of The Torah

Maimonides (in Hilchot Yesodei HaTorah 8:1) writes:

"Israel did not believe in Moshe Rabbeinu because of the miracles that he performed... why then did they believe in him? Because when we stood at Mount Sinai it was we who saw — not that we were told that someone else had seen — the thunder and the lightning; it was our ears that heard — not that we were told that someone else had heard — the voice of G-d saying, 'Moshe Moshe! Tell them thus and thus.' If therefore another prophet were to arise and perform signs and miracles and seek to deny the Torah of Moshe Rabbeinu we would not listen to him. We would know as a certainty that such signs and miracles were delusions. For the prophecies of Moshe are not based on miracles: we believe them because we saw with our own eyes and heard with our own ears just as he did. As the Torah says (Exodus 20:19), 'You saw that from the heavens I spoke to you.'"