

## **Living Straight, Living Real**

*Rabbi Pinchos Lipschutz*

If you were asked to define the period in which we are now living, you could be excused for defining it as hypocritical, where lies supplant truth, as truth is mocked, vilified and tossed away. In every field of human endeavor, people who refer to themselves as progressives are succeeding in replacing truth with fiction.

New words and definitions have been invented to explain facts of life, morality, biology and human existence. Concepts that are ridiculous and have no basis in fact or science are promulgated, written into law and adopted by secular society. Any self-respecting thinking individual can see that what is now accepted and the law makes a mockery of fact.

New concepts are invented, and in their name, ridiculous behaviors are forced upon a population that fears that it will be cancelled if it dares to challenge any of it.

Good people are portrayed as bad and deviants are hailed as avant garde. Fools are brilliant, and the intelligent are marked as backward and out of touch.

When the left protests, they are fighting for democracy, but when the right wins elections, they are anti-democratic. When the right attempts to strengthen the judiciary, they are pilloried for corruption, but when the left usurps and corrupts justice, they are honest and upstanding.

When a former Republican president has classified documents, the FBI raids and ransacks his home, but when the current Democrat president is found with the same, it is covered up. The Republican should be tried for treason, they say, while the Democrat is protected.

The Republican had the economy roaring, the world at peace, and the borders shut. Taxes were lowered. There were ready supplies, low energy costs, safe cities, and low crime, but he was not good, they said. He was a failure. The Democrat has open borders, war raging in Europe, empty store shelves, shortages, high energy costs, runaway inflation, inept leadership, immorality and crime, and we are told that he is a great and effective leader who should run again and be reelected.

We watch it and shrug our shoulders. We've gotten used to it. We accept it as life. We shouldn't. Living with lies, accepting fiction as fact, and praising cheats as commendable and people who take advantage of their brethren as philanthropic eventually takes a toll on us, as our senses become dulled to what is true and proper. We become influenced and less honest, less good, and less G-d-fearing.

When we study the teaching of *Chazal* that the Jews were redeemed from Mitzrayim because they didn't change their names, dress and language, we wonder about the significance of those behaviors. They appear pedantic and minimal, and we wonder what the big deal was. Why would their names, or their style of dress, or their language make enough of a difference to earn them the right to be redeemed?

The answer is that by maintaining those three outward identifying factors, they were showing that they had not assimilated into the fictitious philosophies of their hosts. They showed that they had not adopted their lifestyles, which were predicated on a host of lies and were fostered to allow aberrant immoral behavioral to take hold. Despite their sorry situation, the Jews remained loyal to the truths and morals handed down to them throughout the generations.

In our time, as well, we need to endeavor to advocate for morality in the country, for the behavior of the culture definitely affects us and our behavior. We have to demonstrate fidelity to the integrity and nobility of our forefathers and prevent ourselves from succumbing to lower forms of conduct, manners and practices.

The Alter of Kelm writes that there are different types of people who search for the truth. There are those who have conquered their *middos* to the degree that it has become their second nature not to do anything bad. Then there are those who would like to be led by their bad *middos*, but their intelligence prevents them from acting that way, for they know that it is wrong and will cause bad things to happen to them. Therefore, they control their desires and follow the directives of their intellect.

A third type are people who are not smart. They have strong lusts and desires that blind their limited intellects, and they think that their pursuits will be good for them. However, if someone were to approach them and explain their error to them, since they value the truth, they will listen to the person's admonishment. There is hope for such people, because their inner desire is to follow the truth and they are willing to listen to – and learn – from others.

The worst of all are people who are far removed from the truth, yet they want the truth. Such people are like someone who at night wants it to be day, but when told that it is night will acquiesce and accept that it is night, even though he would rather it be day.

A wise man accepts reality and deals with it, but the senseless person seeks to twist reality to conform to his wants.

Paroh and his people twisted their sense of reality to conform to the way they wanted to view the world. The Jews, starting with Yosef and Yaakov, and those who followed after them, had enhanced the economy of Mitzrayim and the wellbeing of its citizens. When Paroh decided that his political career would be better off without the Jews around, he conveniently forgot about Yosef and his father and brothers. He changed the reality to conform to his egocentric desires.

When Hashem sent Moshe to Paroh on a mission to free the Jews from bondage, Moshe performed miracles to prove his veracity to Paroh. But the Mitzri leader couldn't accept a reality that was different from his illusions about himself and his powers. He had his magicians repeat Moshe's acts to absolve himself of the need of conforming to the will of the Creator.

When Aharon's stick swallowed the sticks of the magicians, proving that Moshe and Aharon were empowered by a higher force, Paroh simply ignored the act, for it didn't conform to his craving.

When Moshe Rabbeinu warned Paroh that if he doesn't free the Jews he will be punished, he was unfazed yet again. He instructed his magicians to turn water

to blood and they did so. He disregarded Moshe's warning at great peril to himself and his country, and they continued to suffer without water.

Although the people were suffering, when Paroh saw that his employees could mimic what Moshe had done, that was enough for him to pacify himself that what Moshe accomplished was not especially meaningful. Since Paroh's primary interest was not the truth, but rather to continue living and ruling with the fantasy about his supernatural powers and subjugating a lower class of people, he was able to continue the justification of that.

And so it proceeds throughout the *parsha*. Paroh's lust for power led him to continuously twist the obvious, apparent reality to conform to his wishes.

We study the *parsha* year after year and revel in the stories about the *makkos*, which lead to the eventual freedom of the Jewish people from slavery. We wonder each year anew how it could be that the Mitzriyim and their leader experienced these terrible punishments time after time, and as soon as the affliction was removed, they returned to their grievous behavior towards the Jews.

We laugh at Paroh's folly and appreciate anew our good fortune. For him it was dark, while for us it was light. He suffered from boils, while we were spared. By him, wild animals marauded about, while we were safe. How could he not have noticed? How could he and his people not have seen that they were being punished for mistreating our forefathers? How could they continue to neglect Moshe's warnings?

But instead of mocking them, we should turn the focus on ourselves and see if we are afflicted by that same disease. Do we dedicate ourselves to living lives of only truth? Are we always scrupulous in all we do, or do we sometimes shade the truth in the pursuit of landing a customer or making a couple of extra dollars off an existing customer? Do we follow the truth of Torah completely, or do we cheat sometimes when we think nobody is looking? Do we take advantage of people?

Do we always view things with the proper perspective, or do we twist reality to conform to our desire for pleasure and enjoyment? Do we justify honoring the dishonorable because we think it will bring us some benefit? If we feel that we are justified in pursuing a course of action, do we ignore advice from people who know better and have less of a *negiah* than we do? Do we promote the corrupt, convincing ourselves that they will repay us in some way?

Do we preach to our children, family, and students one way and then, when it comes to ourselves, do the exact opposite, because we have different truths for us and them?

When we learn the *parsha* week after week, do we learn the lessons that are plainly evident to all who seek the truth and all who seek to improve their lives, or do we twist the message so that it should not affect us and our behavior?

We are basically good people, seeking to live good lives, or else we wouldn't be reading this. We wouldn't be studying the *parsha* and we wouldn't be living where we do and how we do. But man is always driven to do better, and that drive must be in spiritual matters as well, not only physical matters.

Our ambition must be not just to get a better job or to make more money, but to be a better person and a better *Yid*. We must seek to improve our *middos*, our *bein adam lachaveiro*, and our *bein adam laMakom*. When we deal with people, we should seek to help them, making life better and easier for them, not more expensive and more complicated and difficult.

Hashem put us here for a reason, and that is the truth, and the reason is not to take advantage of people, to chisel people out of another couple of dollars, putting people down and taking advantage of them. The truth of a *Yiddishe* life is that no matter what it is that we do for a living, we should use our position to help, not to hinder; to improve, not to impair; to impress, not to depress.

That is the way a good *Yid* is meant to live. That's what *Chazal* mean when they say that they didn't change *shemom*, *malbushom*, and *leshonam*. It means that they didn't trade in the things that set us apart, that differentiate a nation with *neshamos* from nations without.

We stick to the truth. We flock to the truth. We run from deceit, duplicity, insincerity and hypocrisy.

We act in ways that merit the *geulah sheleimah bemeheirah*.