

Emet
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We live in a time of so-called “fake news.” In other words, lies.

Not just lies, but lies with potentially fatal consequences.

I begin with a question about Presidents and lies. Not the President-elect. Other Presidents.

Did George Washington say to his father, while little George held his new hatchet next to a damaged cherry tree, “I cannot tell a lie, father – I damaged this tree”?

Did he really say, “I cannot tell a lie?” Is that a true story? Or is that what is now popularly called “fake news”?

In other words, is the claim that our first President said he could not tell a lie itself a lie?

Sorry to say, it is. This lie [also called “legend” now that it’s a very old lie] was entirely made up by a biographer of Washington who wanted him to look good.

By the way, you should be asking me: “Rabbi, how do you know that story is not true?”

Good question. We should all be asking that question about any claim of fact.

I found the explanation on a website for Mount Vernon published by the Mount Vernon Ladies’ Association, a charity supporting Mount Vernon that is rated with four stars by Charity Navigator. I trust the site, so I believe the story.

Here are some other statements made or attributed to Presidents of the United States. Did a President say this and, if so, who was that President?

First quote: “I did not have sexual relations with that woman, Miss Lewinsky.”

[Wait for answer.]

Second quote: “We must act to prevent Saddam Hussein from using his vast arsenal of weapons of mass destruction.”

Wrong. George Bush never said that and never directly claimed that Iraq had such weapons, so far as my research shows. I rely in part on a helpful website called JustFacts.com that has the following mission and vision:

The mission of Just Facts is to research and publish verifiable facts about the leading public policy issues of our time. To accomplish this with impartiality and excellence, we abide by Standards of Credibility to determine what constitutes a credible fact and what does not.

Our vision is to equip individuals throughout the world with facts that empower them to make truly informed decisions. This requires authoritative facts that accurately convey big picture realities, not half-truths or talking points.

Here is a third quote of something that may or may not have been said by a President:

"Repeated acts of violence against the armed forces of the United States must be met not only with alert defense, but with positive reply. The reply is being given as I speak to you tonight."

Recognize the speaker?

That was President Lyndon Johnson addressing the nation on national television in August, 1964. He and others in authority claimed that ships of the United States in international waters off North Vietnam were under enemy attack.

That claim, we now know, was false. And it led to passage of the Gulf of Tonkin Resolution and our escalating involvement in the disastrous Vietnam War.

Until perhaps the middle of the last century we generally revered and believed our Presidents. We told and retold the cherry tree legend of George "I Cannot Tell a Lie" Washington. We called Abraham Lincoln "Honest Abe."

Each of us could likely have a view on when that changed. For me it was the presidency of Lyndon Johnson, when we learned about the Gulf of Tonkin lie, and then Richard Nixon, with too many examples to take our time. Nobody I know would defend Nixon as a person who cannot tell a lie.

Our problem with lies goes far beyond what Presidents may say. Just this week we learned two terrible stories, both of which I assure you are true. These events warn us of the dangers of lies.

On Wednesday, we learned that a Florida woman was charged with making death threats against the parents of a child who died in the Sandy Hook Elementary School shootings in Newtown, Connecticut.

The U.S. Department of Justice announced the charges. It said in a statement 57-year-old Lucy Richards of Tampa made the threats because she thought the December 2012 shootings were a hoax. Richards was arrested and charged with four counts of transmitting threats.

In fact, as we know, the Sandy Hook shootings were no hoax. They left 20 children and six adults dead.

So why did Richards think that never happened?

The answer is disturbing. One reputable newspaper says that some of those who believe the shooting never happened are called “Sandy Hook Truthers.” They claim, with no credible evidence, that the Obama administration manufactured a false claim of a massive shooting to ratchet up support for tougher gun control measures.

Many of the movement’s adherents appear to have ties to the so-called “9-11 Truthers.” They claim that the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, were an inside job by the Bush administration.

Their theories on the shooting in Sandy Hook also lack any basis in fact, reality or common sense.

Some of them crow about the “smoking gun” they say proves the shooting was a hoax. It is a photo of President Barack Obama, backstage at a Newtown vigil two days after the shooting, a young blonde girl sitting on his lap.

They insist the girl is six-year-old Emilie Parker, one of the 20 child victims of the shooting. The Sandy Hook Truthers claim her parents slipped up in their participation in the hoax, and allowed their eldest daughter to cuddle up to Obama.

On a YouTube video the narrator says, “The story that she was killed at Sandy Hook is not possible, because here she is sitting on the president’s lap after the shooting.” That video is one of dozens of its kind. This one received more than 260,000 web hits.

In fact, the girl sitting on the lap of President Obama is the dead girl’s little sister.

Just one more example:

Five days ago, we read the following account in the New York Times, an account which I believe. The story says:

Edgar M. Welch, a 28-year-old father of two from Salisbury, North Carolina, recently read online that Comet Ping Pong, a pizza restaurant in northwest Washington, was harboring young children as sex slaves as part of a child-abuse ring led by Hillary Clinton.

The articles making those allegations were widespread across the web, appearing on sites including Facebook and Twitter. Apparently concerned, Mr. Welch drove about six hours on Sunday from his home to Comet Ping Pong to see the situation for himself, according to court documents. Not long after arriving at the pizzeria, the police said, he fired from an assault-like AR-15 rifle. The police arrested him. They found a rifle and a handgun in the restaurant. No one was hurt.

In an arraignment on Monday Mr. Welch was ordered held. According to the criminal complaint, he told the authorities that he was armed to help rescue children but that he surrendered peacefully after finding no evidence that “children were being harbored in the restaurant.” He was charged with four counts, including felony assault with a deadly weapon and carrying a gun without a license outside a home or business.

That attack could have turned out much worse than it did. But it was all sparked by so-called “fake news.” By lies.

So, what is Jewish about all this?

Speaking only the truth is one of the highest Jewish ethics. The proof of that claim is found, among other places, in Rabbi Joseph Telushkin’s comprehensive work, a two-volume book called A Code of Jewish Ethics. Here is Rabbi Telushkin on the obligation to be truthful:

There are many acts prohibited in the Torah: we must not steal or cheat, commit adultery, or take advantage of the blind. But falsehood is unique as the only sin the Torah commands us to avoid actively. Exodus 23:7 says, “Stay far away from falsehood.”

Another Torah commandment explicitly prohibits lying: “You shall not lie to one another.”

A passage in Proverbs says, “Lying lips are an abomination to the Lord.”

The Torah also says that truth is one of God’s attributes, while the Talmud teaches that “the seal of God is truth.”

The Hebrew word for “truth” is “emet.” In Yiddish, it’s “emess,” as in, “I’m telling you, it’s the emess.”

Rabbi Arthur Green, founder of my rabbinical school, wrote a book called These Are the Words. It consists of brief essays on essential Hebrew words. Regarding “emet,” Rabbi Green says:

Truth is God’s own seal, according to the rabbis. The three letters of the word “emet” are “aleph,” “mem” and “taf.” These are the first, middle and last

letters of the Hebrew alphabet. Truth has to be broad and open enough to encompass all letters, all words, all of existence. God's seal of truth commands us to be honest and to live with integrity. This has to do with every aspect of our lives, from our business dealings and political system to the way we express our faith in God. What we do and say should be out in the open, accessible to all who want to see it, and capable of passing human tests of truth.

What are the "human tests of truth" to which Rabbi Green refers? And how can we apply them when we read or hear a claim or story and want to make sure it is true?

I recommend using the JustFacts.com website I mentioned, as well as those I circulated in my sermon on facts and opinions before the election. I'll send those around again with this sermon.

The JustFacts website uses criteria they call "Standards of Credibility." Some of these we can use as well to meet the standard of "human tests of truth" to which Rabbi Green refers.

* Clarity. When we speak, let us use language that is precise and unambiguous in order to minimize the potential for misinterpretation.

* Primary Sources: When possible, identify and rely upon credible primary sources instead of secondary ones. This is because secondary sources often misrepresent primary sources or neglect to convey their nuances or caveats. For example, when I investigated what President Johnson said that led to passage of the Gulf of Tonkin resolution, I reviewed documents compiled by the United States Naval Institute. It's not hard to do. I just Googled "gulf of tonkin lie."

* Comprehensiveness: Avoid stating as facts a partial story that may paint a distorted picture of reality by virtue of what is left unsaid.

For example, we can find online reports on changes in the national debt during the administrations of various Presidents. These reports often fail to mention the role of Congress and numerous other variables that affect the national debt. The omission of these additional facts in effect turn a partial story into a lie; a partial truth can sometimes amount to a total lie. This is why the oath administered to trial witnesses is, "Do you swear to tell the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth, so help you God?"

* Accuracy, not Balance: We should strive for comprehensive accuracy, not balance. Press outlets often provide quotes from people on opposing sides of an issue. But this drive for "equal time" can be misleading. There is nothing to prevent a news source from quoting the most compelling argument from one side and the

weakest from the other. Also, such sound bites are often loaded with rhetoric and misinformation.

We should view with suspicion any story that contradicts our common sense, like the story about Hillary Clinton running a child sex slave ring out of a pizza joint. We need to search out verifiable facts and not circulate falsehoods and propaganda.

Today's news media, including particularly social media like Facebook and Twitter, can be entertaining. But we must ask ourselves before circulating claims we find there, "Does this report include information I can trust and that I and others need to make quality decisions?"

Make the effort to gather credible facts and ponder their implications. Our views and the claims we pass along have consequences for the people around us. Refuse to allow misinformation or irrationalities to manipulate our thinking. Form our own opinions based upon serious thought and broad knowledge.

That is the Jewish approach to truth.