

Yom Kippur 5787 - Morning

"When Small Lies Become Something More"

By Rabbi Gabriel Botnick

Over this past summer, it seemed as though everyone was reading — and talking about — Patrick Radden Keefe's much celebrated and critically acclaimed new book, *London Falling*. Without giving away the book's central turns, it tells the story of Zac Brettler, a young man who grew up not far from here, in Maida Vale, and who, in 2019, was found dead on the banks of the Thames. After months of a drawn-out and fruitless police investigation, Zac's parents decided to take matters into their own hands and began their own investigation in order to determine what really led to their son's death.

Along the way, the Brettlers discovered that Zac had constructed an entirely new identity for himself — an alter ego as the son of a wealthy Russian oligarch. He presented himself as someone with immense wealth and access, and he used that identity to buy his way into a world in which he did not truly belong: London's Russian underworld. But the more Zac lived inside that story, the more the story demanded of him. One invention required another. One performance had to be protected by the next. Until eventually, he was no longer simply telling a story. Rather, he found himself trapped inside the person the story required him to be.

Now, because this book is so new, I don't want to divulge any more of what unfolds. But it is worth noting that it turns out Zac was not the first person in his family to build part of an identity around something that was not true. You see, Zac was the grandson of the late Rabbi Hugo Gryn — the much-loved British Reform rabbi, Holocaust survivor, broadcaster, and leading voice in interfaith dialogue. I know many of you have fond memories of Rabbi Gryn from your childhoods at West London Synagogue.

In *London Falling*, Keefe recounts how Rabbi Gryn built much of his reputation as a man of letters based on his time reading mathematics at Cambridge. However, after Rabbi Gryn's death, as details of his student days were being researched for an obituary, it was discovered that Cambridge had no record of him ever studying there. It turns out Rabbi Gryn had completely fabricated this foundational story. Of course, we cannot know exactly how this story began. Perhaps, as a young man, he simply made this claim in order to open an otherwise closed door, and most likely, at the time, it felt like a harmless misrepresentation. But once the story had been told, it became difficult — if not impossible — for him to withdraw. The claim had to be

repeated. The biography had to remain coherent. And the more publicly admired Rabbi Gryn became, the harder it would have been for him to admit the truth and to dismantle the façade.

And it really is a shame that he never had a chance to address this while he was still alive. Yes, I'm sure there would have been people who felt misled or betrayed by this fabrication. But even undoing this one small aspect of his biography could never undo the countless other things he achieved throughout his life and career, the people whose lives he enriched, and the difference he made in the world.

Now, these are two exceptional stories which just so happen to come from the same family line. Their scales are rather unusual, and their consequences were quite dramatic. But the temptation to lie isn't only the territory of the extreme and exceptional. It is far more universal. It is something we are all guilty of having done at some point or another in our own lives. Maybe we've made small omissions, or edited our stories out of convenience. Maybe we've told a version of the truth that made us look better than it really should have, or kept us from having to explain ourselves, or allowed us to avoid an uncomfortable conversation.

The temptation to lie is indeed so universal that it's hardcoded into our Yom Kippur liturgy. In Ashamnu and Al Cheit, we confess again and again to the myriad ways in which we've misused speech: dibarnu dofi, we've spoken falsely; tafalnu sheker, we've advanced lies; kizavnu, we've lied. Al cheit shechatanu lefanekha, for the sins we've committed — bedibur peh, through deception; bechazav, through telling lies; bishvu'at shav, through false promises. And notice how these confessionals are written in the collective: we do these things, we misuse speech, and cause harm with our words. Not necessarily all of us, or all the time, not even every year — but all of us do fall victim to the temptation to lie, and none of us can pretend that this temptation belongs only to other people.

And if you're still tempted to sit here and say, "Oh, but I've never been tempted to lie," I assure you that we all have been tempted. So let me say it here, in public, first: I myself am guilty of this. When I was a child, I was not always the most honest. I would often cheat at board games. I might have moved a piece an extra square, or claimed I rolled a different number on the dice. There were definitely times when I claimed my brother had hit me — though he certainly had not, and, in fact, he had been nowhere near me — but still, I would go crying to my mother, just to watch him get into trouble. And then, when my mother wasn't looking, I'd look at him and laugh. I was a little shit — sorry, Ashamnu.

But sometime around my Bar Mitzvah, I began to notice the person I was becoming, and I did not want to be that person. I did not want to be the person who nobody trusted or wanted to play with. I did not want every true thing I said to be met with suspicions of doubt. So I made a conscious decision to change.

The danger of a small lie is not just that someone may discover it. The danger is what it demands of us, and what it can easily lead to. One small lie can require a second, and then a third, in order to preserve not just the original statement but everything else we built around it. And even when there is no dramatic escalation, those small deceptions start teaching us something dangerous: what we can get away with, what we are capable of hiding, what we can excuse in our own behaviour. They can then begin to shape other parts of our lives and convince us that we can get away with even more — more than just telling another lie, but something far more harmful.

Perhaps that is one reason why false speech appears so prominently, and so early on, in the confessionals of Ashamnu and Al Cheit — not because lying is necessarily the worst thing any person has ever done, but because one single, tiny fabrication can become a gateway. It can become the means by which we conceal, rationalise, and even permit almost everything else that follows it. And so we need always to be mindful of our speech, even when no one is looking, even when we are certain we can get away with it — because our tradition wants us to know that God will always know. Or, at the very least: you, yourself, will always know.

This idea echoes throughout the Yom Kippur liturgy, every time we refer to God as *chokeir lev u'vochein klayot*, the One who searches the heart and examines the innermost self. Hidden conduct is not spiritually irrelevant simply because no one else can discover it. We, ourselves, know where the story has been edited. We know what we are leaving out of the stories we tell. We know the distance between the person other people see and the person who remains when no one is looking. And this calls us to live with a kind of consistency, a kind of integrity, so that our public actions — our public persona — should reflect our private lives: our thoughts, our feelings, what we do at home when no one else is there to hold us accountable.

This need for the public and private selves to mirror one another is held up by a rabbinic ideal: *tokho kevaro*, that one's inside should be like their outside. This ideal is based on a rabbinic understanding of how the Torah describes the Ark of the Covenant. You see, in the Book of Exodus, God commands that the Ark should be made of wood, but that it should be overlaid in gold — both inside and out. The rabbis ask: why should this matter? Why bother covering the inside of the Ark in gold if no one is ever going to see it? Once the tablets of the Ten

Commandments are placed inside, the lid is never taken off again. So why worry about the inside being covered in gold?

And the answer, offered by the great sage Rava in this Talmudic discussion, is that the Ark of the Covenant teaches us a valuable lesson: kol talmid chacham she'ein tokho k'varo, eino talmid chacham — any Torah scholar whose inside is not like their outside is no true Torah scholar. Tokho kevaro: one's inside and outside must always match. Our public self and our private self should always mirror one another. Because having integrity does not merely mean conducting oneself admirably. It means allowing our values to guide us in all of our actions — both in public as well as in private, when others can see and acknowledge what we've done as well as when no one will ever know.

So how do we arrive at such a state of integrity? How do we lessen the distance between the person we present to the world and the person we are in private? Elsewhere in the Torah, we're given the charge: tzedek tzedek tirdof, most often translated as "justice, justice, you shall pursue." However, in the Aramaic translation of the Torah, the Targum Onkelos, this line is translated as kushta kushta havei radif, or "truth, truth, you shall pursue." So instead of pursuing justice, we're commanded to pursue truth — which is rather curious, until you understand what the Chassidic masters do with this.

According to the Netivot Shalom, this shift from justice to truth is intended to teach us that the only way to arrive at a complete and total sense of the truth is through truth — or rather, through acts of truth. He explains that there are different kinds of truth: the truth we know in our minds, the truth we feel in our hearts, and the truth we embody through our words and our actions. The only way we can reach complete truth, he argues, is when all of these subordinate truths come into alignment. Which means we need to live truthfully, not only speak truthfully, but also act truthfully, to make sure our speech and actions reflect what we're actually thinking and feeling. In other words, to ensure our public selves mirror our private, or inner, selves as closely as possible.

But know this: living truthfully, as a goal, always carries a warning. We must be cautious for our truthfulness never to become cruelty. It's one thing to be honest, and another thing entirely to be brutally honest. So we should always be careful to be kind and compassionate without obfuscating the truth.

Yom Kippur can sometimes feel like one long day of rebuke, a day spent being told how much we have done wrong. But the confessions can offer something more useful than mere

accusations. They can be an invitation to notice: those small falsehoods, the strategic omissions, the version of ourselves we have finely crafted for other people. All these things that we've convinced ourselves don't really matter — but they do. Some of those acts do call for a sincere apology, and to make amends with the people we've wronged. But many of those acts ask something else of us: to notice how they did not necessarily harm anyone else, but how they still kept us from living with the integrity we truly wish to achieve. Such acts don't require us to apologise to anyone. But they ask us to make a commitment to ourselves — a commitment not to repeat behaviours that we know are hurting us, if not others. And by making the conscious decision, again and again, to choose truth over something easier, we will become more and more the person we desire to be.

But here's the thing: even after we find ourselves living comfortably in the truth, the temptation to speak falsely will still remain, especially when no one is looking. It's been more than thirty years since I made the decision to live more truthfully, and I am still tempted, occasionally, to do otherwise.

Just this summer, while I was on holiday with my family, my wife, Rose, decided she wanted to stay on the beach just a little bit longer while I took our kids back to the flat. I put our son down for a nap and enjoyed a lazy afternoon in the air conditioning with our daughter. After our son woke up, he asked for some gelato and to watch a show on the iPad. And I thought: why not? I didn't have an issue with this — after all, we're on holiday. But I knew Rose probably would have preferred a different response, and I suspected she might not have been thrilled by the choice I had made. It would have been so easy not to tell her how we spent that time, or simply to bend the truth a little bit, either directly or by omission. It was tempting. I could have avoided a difficult conversation, or having to defend my choices. But I told her what we did when she asked, because I did not want to give in to that temptation. Because I know those small deceptions do matter. Because I knew that if I didn't speak truthfully, I would have been teaching my kids that it's okay to lie, especially if you can get away with it.

Maimonides teaches that teshuvah — repentance — is only fully realised when we face the very same temptation that previously we had given in to, but instead, this time, we choose differently. Not because we were afraid of getting caught, but because we determined we wanted to do better, to live with more integrity.

Look, I'm not saying we're all terrible liars, or that we're all struggling in some deep way with the truth. Most of us are not maintaining some complex invented identity, or facing any real damage in our lives on account of the way we speak. But nearly all of us know the temptation of that

small departure from the truth, of how much easier it might feel to leave something out, or misrepresent what really happened. But Yom Kippur asks us to notice how those seemingly insignificant and harmless choices can have a negative effect not only on others but on ourselves as well — how they can bleed into other parts of who we are, and can shape who we are becoming.

So instead of setting for ourselves one grand, unrealistic pledge never to fail again — because, we know, we will fail — maybe we can start somewhere smaller: a commitment to lessen the distance between what we know or feel and what we say or do, between the person we present to the world and the person who remains when no one is looking. Because the habits we nurture in life's smallest moments become the character we rely upon in its largest. And when those larger moments come, when truth is harder, when honesty costs more, when integrity is no longer merely admirable but necessary, we won't have to worry about suddenly becoming truthful people. We will discover that, slowly and quietly, choice by choice, that is precisely who we already are.