**Drasha/ Sermon "Mishpatim: The Truth, and Nothing But"**

Noela Rukundo sat in a car outside her home in Melbourne, Australia, last year, watching as the last few mourners filed out. They were leaving a funeral -- her funeral.

Finally, she spotted the man she’d been waiting for. She stepped out of her car, and her husband put his hands on his head in horror.

“Is it my eyes?” she remembered him saying. “Is it a ghost?”

“Surprise! I’m still alive!” she replied.

Far from being happy, the man looked terrified. Five days earlier, he had ordered a team of hit men to kill wife of 10 years. And they did -- well, they told him they did. They even got him to pay an extra few thousand dollars for carrying out the crime.

Now here was his wife, standing before him. In an interview this past week, Noela recalled how he touched her shoulder to find it unnervingly solid. He jumped. Then he started screaming.

“I’m sorry for everything,” he cried.

But it was far too late for apologies; Noela called the police. The husband, Balenga Kalala, ultimately pleaded guilty and was sentenced to nine years in prison for incitement to murder.

The happy ending -- or as happy as can be expected to a story in which a man tries to have his wife killed -- was made possible by three unusually principled hit men. The three gangsters kidnapped Noela, but then let her go because they didn't believe in killing women, and they knew her brother. But they would keep her husband’s money and tell him that she was dead -- setting the stage for Noela to go to the police and give her treacherous husband the surprise of his life.

Noela's story brings to mind a verse in this week's Torah portion, MIshpatim: M'dvear sheker tirchak -- Distance yourself from falsehood.

It is well known that honesty is one of the most important character traits and its antithesis, falsehood, is one of the most undesirable.

Few people need to be told that a murder-for-hire plot involves many unacceptable forms of behavior, including, of course, dishonesty. But it's of interest that the Torah doesn't simply tell us 'thou shalt not lie', but midvar sheker tirchak; stay far, far away from a lie. Even something that isn't an open bold-faced lie is prohibited to a Jew.

A story appeared recently about a man who went to a concert. At the end of the concert, he noticed two ushers standing near his seat who were applauding harder than anybody else in the whole place.

The concert-goer said he was thrilled with this particular concert because of the talent and virtuosity of the musicians. It also impressed him greatly to see two ushers applauding more vigorously than all of the concert goers. His experience was somewhat diminished, however, when he heard one usher say to the other,

"Keep clapping. If we can get them to do another encore, we get overtime!"

Outright falsehoods may be something avoided by most people we know, but 'fudging the truth' is common. The Torah tells us to stay as far away from sheker as possible. Given the severity of lying, it is worthwhile to clarify what is included within the prohibition of midvar sheker tirchak. Let's examine the following case:

John owes Bill money and the date for repayment has already passed. Bill phones John to request his money, but John’s wife answers the phone. John does not want to speak to Bill but he also does not want his wife to lie and say that he is not home when he really is. Therefore John steps just outside his house and instructs his wife to tell Bill that he is not home. This is technically true; John is now not in the house, even though he could speak to Bill if he so desired. One may think that this does not constitute falsehood because no false words were spoken. Is this indeed the case?

The Talmud discusses a case in which a man was owed money. The lender brought the borrower before a Beis Din and said to him: “Pay me back.” The borrower said: “I already paid you.” The rabbi said to the borrower: “In that case, you must swear an oath that you have given him the money.” The borrower went to get his cane, hid the money he owed inside its hollow, and leaned on the cane as he returned to the courtroom. He said to the lender: “Hold this cane in your hand,” ostensibly to free his own hands to take hold of a Torah scroll. He then took the Torah scroll and swore that he had already given the money into the lender’s hand. The lender, incensed at the man’s chutzpah, broke the cane. Suddenly all the money inside spilled to the ground and it emerged that he had indeed sworn the technical truth!

The borrower was obviously guilty of terrible midos (character traits). But did he actually commit a genuine transgression? The Gemara concludes that he did because an oath taker must adhere not only to the plain definition of his words, but also to the meaning they are meant to convey as well. Consequently, he was guilty of swearing falsely by taking an oath that was technically truthful but deceptive.

We learn from here that saying words that are technically true does not mean that a person can deceive others by saying true words with a misleading message.

Misleading messages and fudging the truth. There's a lot of that going around these days. At times, we just take it in stride as good fun.

A large, well established, lumber camp advertised that they were looking for a good lumberjack. The very next day, a skinny man showed up at the camp with his axe, and knocked on the head lumberjack's door.

The head lumberjack took one look at the little man and told him to leave.

"Just give me a chance to show you what I can do," said the skinny man.

"Okay, see that giant tree over there?" said the lumberjack. "Take your axe and go cut it down."

The skinny man headed for the tree, and in five minutes he was back knocking on the lumberjack's door.

I cut the tree down," said the man.

The lumberjack couldn't believe his eyes and said, "Where did you get the skill to chop down trees like that?"

"In the Sahara Forest," replied the puny man.

"You mean the Sahara Desert," said the lumberjack.

The little man laughed and answered back, "Oh sure, that's what they call it now!"

There are groups in the United States and elsewhere called 'Liars Clubs'. The Burlington Liars Club of Wisconsin has had a contest for 85 years, awarding a prize to the one with the biggest fib. There is one unofficial rule: No politicians are allowed. The club considers them professionals.

To return to our case of John and Bill, it would seem that John’s strategy of standing outside the house does not help avoid the transgression of midvar sheker tirchak. The words that he is not home may be true but the message is not. Bill is not interested in the technical location of John; he wants to know if John is present so that Bill can speak to him. Thus, by saying that he is not present, he is conveying a misleading message.

The Mishna (Ethics of the Fathers 1:18) exclaims that truth is one of the very pillars that the world stands upon.

The Hebrew word for truth, emes (אמת), is made up of the first letter of the Hebrew alphabet (א), the middle letter (מ) and the last letter (ת). This expresses that truth is only something that is never changing, from the beginning until the very end. Truth does not only mean not to lie, but that our entire identity should be true, through and through.

The Talmud (Shabbos, 55a) exclaims, “The seal of the Holy One, blessed be He, is truth.” Chassidus explains, that the reason for this is because in reality, “There is nothing besides Him.” Ultimately then, the statement, Distance yourself from a false matter requires that a person be completely permeated with the cognizance of G-d.

"I am different from Washington," declared Mark Twain. "I have a higher, grander standard of principle. Washington could not lie. I can lie, but I won’t."

When you say you'll be there -- be there. Don't say "I'll try." We should not only not want to mislead others, but be concerned with misleading ourselves.

The critical goal of a Jew is to transform this world, which is called “a world of lies,” to the point that, as the prophet (Isaiah, 11:9) states: “The land shall be full of knowledge of the Lord as water covers the sea bed.”

May we merit to completely distance ourselves from false matters, every day coming closer to the truth that there is really nothing besides G-d.