

SHABBAT SERMON
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Hillary Clinton's Bosnian Adventure ... and Our Flights of Fancy

The Pope will have to wait! I was going to speak this week about Pope Benedict's coming to the U.S. and his recent decision to reinsert a prayer for the conversion of the Jews in the Latin version of the Catholic Mass. But the Pope will have to wait! Last Shabbos I spoke about Sen. Barack Obama and his pastor, and so this week in the interest of fairness and even-handedness, I want to speak to you about Sen. Hillary Clinton's "dangerous" mission to Bosnia.

Sen. Clinton got herself into a lot of trouble when she told of how, when she was the First Lady, she visited Bosnia and when her plane landed she had to run for safety, dodging bullets. She got into trouble for telling of this incident because it never happened! Yes, she had visited Bosnia, but people who were with her and videos of her visit show that when the plane landed, she was greeted not with bullets but by an eight year old child presenting her with flowers. When confronted with the evidence Sen. Clinton said that she had misspoke ... leading political humorist Andy Borowitz to sarcastically write that it had now been revealed that when Sen. Clinton claimed that she once "wrestled bin Laden in his cave in 1998 and had him pinned to the ground," she really meant to say that she had been with a group of honor roll students at Disney World in Orlando!

It makes you wonder: Why did Sen. Clinton open herself up to such ridicule? After all, there were other people with her ... entertainers, the press, and her own aides who knew the real story. Why did she say something that wasn't true? I raise that question today because she is not the only one who is guilty of this. In recent weeks a whole series of lies and liars had received media attention. Now, of course, political lying is nothing new. Al Gore said he discovered the Internet! F.D.R., when running for Vice President, claimed he wrote Haiti's constitution. It never happened but he turned out to be a pretty good President. Let's be honest: the first person to lie was the first person in this world! Adam, when confronted by God regarding having eaten from the Tree of Knowledge, immediately takes it like a man ... he lies and blames it on his wife! No, lies have been with us since time immemorial, but as you will see, recently there has been a massive dose of lying. It has oftentimes been pointed out that the disease of leprosy spoken of in this morning's Torah portion is called "Metzora" in Hebrew which is related to the words, "motzi ra," "evil speech." If bad speech is comparable to a plague then in recent months we've been suffering from an epidemic! And so we are left with the question: Why do people lie?

The first answer I would give is because people think they have to lie! Eleven years ago Misha Defonseca published her book, "Misha: a Memoir of the Holocaust

Years.” The book swept across Europe and has been translated into eighteen languages and is the basis for a new French movie. And one can understand why. The book tells the gripping story of six year old Misha, who was rescued at school in 1941 when her parents were arrested and deported. She is saved by a family but unhappy with them, she runs away in hopes of finding her parents. Over the next four years she wanders alone across Germany, Poland, the Ukraine, Romania, Yugoslavia, across the Adriatic Sea by boat to Italy and then through Italy across the Alps to France and then back to Belgium. Along the way she is sheltered by a pack of wolves. Wow! What a story! The only problem? Recently, Misha admitted that it never happened! In fact, Misha is not Jewish, she is a baptized Catholic, and she spent the war years safely in Brussels. In fact, Misha is not even Misha ... her name is Monique! So why did she lie? Why did she make up this story? Obviously, to sell the book! After all, if it had been published as a work of fiction, who would take seriously a story about a child being raised by wolves across Europe? It defies belief! Only by claiming that it really happened would anyone be tempted to read it.

James Frey of Oprah Winfrey infamy did the same thing. He fabricated portions of his book in order to make the book more compelling and a better seller. We almost can't fault these people because in a certain sense we sometimes force people into positions where they have to lie. Hillary Clinton and Barack Obama were campaigning through Ohio proclaiming all of the ills and evils of NAFTA, the North American Free Trade Agreement, something which found a receptive audience in the economic stricken citizens of Ohio. But at the same time, the American Ambassador to Canada was telling the Canadians not to take too seriously what the candidates were saying, telling them it was mainly rhetoric and it likely wouldn't result in any change to the Agreement. And for the most part everyone knows that is so. The loss of jobs for Americans is not due to Canadians or Mexicans. It is due to China! NAFTA is not going to change.

But political candidates are sometimes put in a position that telling the truth would cost them too many votes. That's why candidates who don't tell how they really feel about "gun control" for fear of upsetting the gun lobby. The way Mitt Romney spoke on the campaign trail made it seem as if he were a gun-toting hunter. In his words: "I purchased a gun when I was a young man. I've been a hunter pretty much all my life." It was later discovered "all my life" meant "twice." Why did he lie? I guess he thought he had to!

And I, as a clergyman, can identify with that. I remember reading about a Catholic priest who I have to tell you, most every rabbi, priest and minister in this country in some ways – consciously or unconsciously – envies him for what he did ... but we wouldn't do it ourselves. What is it that he did? "He" is Rev. Scott Mansfield of New Mexico. And this past year he officiated at the funeral of Ben Martinez, a bar owner, former town councilman and a lifelong Catholic. Ben died at the age of 80, and Father Mansfield, in his words of eulogy for Mr. Martinez, criticized the "lukewarm" faith of the deceased and said – and I quote – "The Lord vomited people like Ben out of his mouth to hell." Those were pretty harsh words, rather inappropriate, but I tell you, every rabbi, priest and minister - in our heart of hearts - would at times like to say

something like he did! But we don't! Instead I always think of my dear friend, Irv Kroll – a man who comes to worship here 365 days of the year – and who says to me from time to time, “Rabbi, come on. I listen to your eulogies and all your plaque dedications. You're always saying how this one is special and that one's outstanding and this one is unique ... everybody's so great. Come on, rabbi, get off of it!” And I always reply to him, “Don't worry, Irv. When it comes your turn, I'll lie about you too!”

And not just him! And for good reason! Ben Martinez's family has filed a lawsuit against Rev. Mansfield and the Roman Catholic Archdiocese of Santa Fe; suing a man for telling the truth. So yes, sometimes people lie because they feel they have to!

A second reason why people lie is because they want to ... because they want to make a point; a point usually meant to hurt others. Recently in Russia's third largest city, posters have appeared proclaiming – and I quote – “These vermin are still performing rituals, stealing small children and draining their blood to make their sacred bread.” This is the old blood libel that claims Jews go around killing Christian children in order to use their blood to bake matzoh or to make wine for Pesach. Jews across the generations were persecuted and many were killed because of this accusation. And here it is the 21st century and it's still being made! And not only is there no evidence ever given to back up this libel, quite the contrary, one of the things the Jewish people are noted for is our abhorrence of blood. You tell me what other people are commanded that before they eat a piece of meat, they must either salt it or broil it to take out as much of the blood as possible? If there is any one people who could never be accused of a blood libel, it is the Jewish people. And yet, people go around lying and saying we are guilty. Why? Because they want to!

In the second week of March, the Palestinian Authority's President, Mahmoud Abbas, addressed the Organization of the Islamic Conference in Dakar. Before all the delegates and before all the world, Mr. Abbas – the peace-seeking Abbas – proclaimed, “Our people in the city of Jerusalem are facing ethnic cleansing.” I don't have to tell you what a loaded phrase “ethnic cleansing” is! It means removing unwanted people and replacing them with your own. That's what Mr. Abbas said Israel is doing to the Palestinians in Jerusalem. You would never know from his words that from the time Israel reunited Jerusalem in 1967 until last year, Jerusalem's Arab population skyrocketed 266% ... even during the Intifada the Arab population of Jerusalem continued to grow. It rose from 208,000 at the end of 2000 to 252,000 at the end of 2006; an increase of 21% in six years; far greater, in fact, double the Jewish increase at the same time. Mr. Abbas knows the truth, so why did he lie? Because he wanted to! He wanted to make Israel look bad ... and he knew people would believe him ... no different than there are millions of people in this world who still believe the “urban legend” that on Sept. 11, 2001, 4000 Jews who worked at the World Trade Center had been warned beforehand and stayed home. As if 4000 Jews would agree to do *anything*!

Rev. Jeremiah Wright's claim that the U.S. government spread the AIDS disease in order to get rid of the black population is another one of these lies that serve no purpose except to enrage people to make them think that everyone is out to get them.

And, in fact, a survey revealed that 1/3 of America's black population believe the charge to possibly be true, thus verifying the words of Hitler in his book, "Mein Kampf" defining the Big Lie as a lie so big that no one would believe that someone "could have the impudence to distort the truth so infamously."

Perhaps this is why, when the Torah tell us not to lie, it says: "Midvar sheker tirschak - you shall distance yourself from falsehood." That's a very strange terminology. It doesn't simply say "Do not lie," it says, "Distance yourself from falsehood." Regarding no other prohibition in the Torah do we receive such a commandment – to "distance" ourselves. But perhaps such a warning is necessary when it comes to lies. People tend to justify lying by either claiming it's a "little white lie," and no one is going to be hurt by it, or it's such a "big lie" that no one is going to believe it! No, says the Torah, "big lie" ... "little lie" ... don't fall into the trap ... stay away ... you're stepping into a danger zone.

Having said all that, I think there is one more reason that I think people lie. And that is because they don't think they are lying! They convince themselves they are telling the truth! The author of the false holocaust memoir says – and I quote – "There are times when I find it difficult to differentiate between reality and my inner world. It was not the actual reality – it was MY reality, my way of surviving." Similarly, James Frey wrote regarding his book, "My mistake is writing about the person I created in my mind to help me cope."

And I think something similar happened to Hillary Clinton with her Bosnia story. I think it's possible that she so wants to picture herself as President, that she so wants to picture herself as Commander in Chief, that she really sees herself in those roles, whether it is helping to make peace in Ireland or ducking bullets in Bosnia. If you picture yourself a certain way in your mind, after a while you can begin to believe it's a true picture. Carl Bernstein, of Watergate fame, wrote a book about Hillary Clinton entitled, "A Woman in Charge," in which he writes, "When it comes to herself, she sees with something less than candor and lucidity. She sees – like so many others – what she wants to see."

And she's not the only one. Barack Obama, on receiving the support of Sen. Edward Kennedy and Caroline Kennedy, said things now had come full cycle because it was the Kennedy family who helped bring his father to the U.S. That makes for a nice, touching story. Only problem is ... it never happened! Ronald Reagan claimed he helped liberate the concentration camps. He didn't say whether it was when he was stationed in California or New York! Reagan so pictured himself as the protector of freedom that he saw himself in a role he never played!

And you know who else is like that? You ... and I guess, me! If you were to ask me: What is the greatest type of liar in this world? I would say people who lie to themselves. It is told that the famous Chassidic master, Rabbi Menachem Mendel of Kotzk, used to interpret the Biblical commandment "Thou shall not steal," as meaning, "Thou shall not steal from thyself." Don't delude yourself! "To thine own self be true."

We oftentimes lie to ourselves about our children ... who and what they really are. We oftentimes lie to ourselves about our relationship with others. Oftentimes we are engaged in disagreements with others, thinking the worst of them, being unable to see that frequently we are the ones who are at fault. Remember the story? A senior citizen was driving down the freeway, his cell phone rang. Answering, he heard his wife voice urgently warning him, "Herman, I just heard on the news that there's a car going the wrong way on Interstate 280. Please be careful." "It's not just one car," said Herman, "I see hundreds of them!"

We oftentimes lie to ourselves about ... ourselves! Yes, oftentimes we are not as innocent and pure as we make ourselves out to be. And yes, oftentimes we are not as bad and as persecuted as we think we are. The Psalmist speaks of "dovair emes bilvevo – speaking the truth in one's heart." Knowing thyself, telling the truth to yourself, is the most important quality for change and growth. Hillary Clinton and the other candidates have a good enough record on their own. They don't have to make one up. What they have to do is tell the truth – to us and to themselves.

The festival of Pesach awaits us. Now is the time to clean out the chometz. Philo, a Greek Jewish philosopher, described chometz as "pride" because leavened bread is "puffed up." It is our pride that oftentimes doesn't allow us to see ourselves as we really are ... to admit that sometimes we are the problem ... to be honest with ourselves. Now is the time to clean out that chometz ... out of our homes, yes, but also out of our hearts. That not only is a necessary ingredient for a good President, it makes for a good human being as well. It's clean up time, and if we do it right – outside and in - we can look forward to the holiday of Pesach as a true festival of freedom ... freedom from false pretenses, freedom from the fear of being caught, freedom to really be you and me.