

“God’s Foil” — September 5, 2013

According to rabbinic commentary, at the moment of truth, Isaac asked his father to tell a lie. As he lay bound on the altar, realizing that nothing could stop the sacrifice, he asked his father to lie to his mother.

The midrash has Isaac say, “Please don’t tell Mama about this when she is standing by a pit or on the roof lest she fling herself over the edge and die.” As a matter of fact, don’t tell her at all. (JAG).

A lie in the Torah? To be honest, Abraham has told a bunch during this strange trip. Some were lies of silence, like not telling Sarah about getting the command to offer up Isaac; others were out and out deception.

On the journey Abraham lied to his servants: “You stay here with the donkey. I and the lad will go up yonder to make the offering and then we will return to you.” But clearly, God’s intent was for Abraham to come back alone.

On the way, Isaac, was confused. “Dad, where is the lamb for the offering?” Abraham answered with yet another lie: “God will see to the lamb for the offering, my son,” knowing that Isaac was to be the lamb.

Of course, Abraham justified the lies. Sarah wouldn’t have understood, so he didn’t tell her. The servants didn’t need to know, so he made up a story. Isaac couldn’t be trusted to go along, so he invoked God. And this leaves us very confused, with a heroic patriarch bending the truth at will.

In one midrash called Tanchuma, it gets even more confusing. The rabbis add another character to the mix, increasing the tension. This new figure is determined to explode the lies. His name in the story might surprise you. Satan. His role? To confront Abraham, Sarah and Isaac with the truth.

Before we go on, please understand that the rabbis’ idea of Satan is nothing like that of some of our Christian friends. No red suit. No pitchfork. No leering Lucifer.

No, for the rabbis, Satan was God’s foil, a truth teller, like the fool in Shakespeare’s King Lear. Satan as a devil is not found anywhere in our writings.

What is he doing here? In this midrash, Satan first appears to Abraham and chastises him for planning to sacrifice the son of his old age. But Abraham won’t listen. So Satan turns himself into a raging river to block his progress toward the mountain. Abraham prays and this river vanishes.

So Satan goes to Isaac and tells him Abraham's plan, to sacrifice him on the altar. Isaac answers: I don't believe you. I trust my Dad. And if it is true, then he must have his reasons.

Satan goes back to Abraham and reveals the final truth, saying "Abraham, this is all a test. God does not want you to kill Isaac. You aren't going to have to go through with it. You can stop now."

Abraham ignores him. Satan, frustrated beyond belief, waits until Abraham raises his knife. According to this midrash, "Satan came and shoved Abraham's hand so that the knife fell from his hand." When Abraham picks up the knife again, only then did the voice from heaven call his name to stop him.

Our midrash says that Satan then sped to Sarah to tell her what had just happened with her son and husband. Sarah dies without hearing that her only son Isaac is safe, a plot twist worthy of the Twilight Zone.

In the end, our tradition lauds Abraham for obeying God and Isaac for submitting. Sarah plays the dying heroine. And Satan? He is God's nebbish again, instead of someone who tries to avert a tragedy.

The midrash leaves us with a difficult question: Why in the world would the rabbis bring Satan into the story to contradict the plain meaning of the text?

I believe our Sages were as troubled by Abraham's lies as we are today. They also knew that the fibs of Abraham's family were only examples of untruths told in every family, including yours and mine. It is an exquisite irony that, for the rabbis, the only one willing to tell the truth is Satan. In the Midrash he is no less than the Rabbis' conscience, the one who strips away our secrets and lies.

At Rosh Hashana we might ask, who plays Satan in our lives? Who holds up the truth in the mirror for us to see without flinching?

Dr. Rachel Naomi Remen, in her book Kitchen Table Wisdom, relates the time she played Satan, challenging family secrets and lies of silence. She had a cancer patient named Gloria, a 15-year-old girl, back in the day when chemotherapy was more invasive and less effective. Nothing could hold off the onslaught of the disease.

To make things worse, Gloria's parents had given strict orders not to discuss her condition with her. Remen writes that they had "...emphatically not given their permission. They had posted a sign at the nurses' station reminding us not to discuss her disease or her prognosis. Their wishes were very clear."

At one point, Gloria looked at Dr. Remen and asked, "Am I dying?" Dr. Remen writes: "I knew what I was supposed to say, but as I reached for the professional words of

denial they just wouldn't come...I told her that we were doing everything we knew, but the disease was still growing. If this continued, it was very possible she might die. She closed her eyes for a moment and then told me that she had known. She [then] asked me not to tell her parents."

Dr. Remen continues, "...we began the first of a series of conversations about death...We wondered together – could life go on in some other way? We spoke of heaven and other ideas about the possibility of life after death...for the next week we read and we talked."

And finally, Dr. Remen asked Gloria "how she would feel about talking to her parents...She asked if they knew she was dying and I told her that they did, but that they had not known how to talk to her about it. She said she felt she could talk to them now."

The first conversation was difficult, awkward and emotional. But they opened up and shared their appreciation and love for each other. Gloria was also able to share what was important to her and even made out a little will and testament. She even spoke about the funeral that would be in her honor.

Dr. Remen ends the story as follows: "Gloria slipped into a coma and died peacefully...just before dawn. Both her parents were with her..."

Then the family's private doctor took them to speak together in a counseling room and invited Dr. Remen to join them. Oblivious to what had really gone on, he solemnly declared how good it was that Gloria never knew she was dying. The parents looked at Dr. Remen and smiled.

Afterwards, the parents thanked Dr. Remen, who wrote, "[Gloria] had not died alone, but it had been such a near thing." Thanks to one who could not keep the lie of silence anymore.

Sometimes lying in words or silence may seem appropriate. But in Jewish tradition, the only acceptable lies are those for the sake of Shalom Bayit, or peace in the house. As near as I can understand it, these "acceptable" lies start and end with something like, "Grandma, I love the sweater."

Jack was an only child. He lived for his parents' approval, which they showered on him. He grew up to be almost the perfect student-athlete. He performed at the highest level out of love for his parents.

Academically, he was near the top of his class. He lettered in lacrosse, cross-country and tennis. Handsome, too. His parents made the mistake of looking at his Facebook page one time and were pleased and horrified at what girls were writing to him.

Jack tried to keep a level head. But between his Junior and Senior years, Jack felt something amiss. He stopped believing the accolades. Not even his parents' loving hugs made him feel worthwhile. He felt like an impostor, sliding by on his past reputation. Even though he continued to get good grades and scored great on his SAT, he became despondent.

He never let on to his parents. They had done so much for him he felt he owed them his best smile as well as his top effort. So as senior year began he was perky and full of talk about colleges and scholarships and high school awards, though he was dying inside. Most of his friends bought the act, too.

But one didn't. Gabe was a fellow athlete every bit as talented as Jack, if not quite the same student. They spent a lot of time together, often passing hours in blessed silence, sure that they knew each other's thoughts. No drugs, beer or stupid stuff.

And one Saturday night, about 2 AM, Jack finally let it out. He told Gabe how frustrated he felt, how he was angry all the time, mostly at the people who thought he was Mr. Perfect. He reached into his pocket and handed something to Gabe. He said, "It's my acceptance to Duke and a scholarship to play lacrosse. At Duke! Can you believe it?" Gabe knew exactly how big a deal this was.

But Jack looked disgusted. "All that's going to happen is that I'm going to be matched up with other Mr. Perfects. And we'll all be perfect students and athletes and get married and have to be perfect all over again. Forever. I don't think I can do it, Gabe."

"What do you mean, Jack?" Gabe asked.

Jack didn't lift his eyes but said, "I know how this story ends, Gabe. It's going to end horribly. I'm going to disappoint my parents or fail at something and the whole world is going to come crashing down. The only way I know to stop it is to take myself out of the story."

Gabe asked, "You're not thinking of hurting yourself, are you Jack?" Jack panicked. "I was thinking of it. I was planning to do it over Halloween. You're not going to tell anyone, are you? You're my friend. You can't tell anyone about this."

Gabe said, "I like you too much for that, Jack." Jack got angry. "If you tell, you won't be my friend anymore." Gabe got up to leave and said, "I'd rather have a living enemy than a dead friend." Next day Gabe told the counselor at school, who immediately called Jack's parents.

It was two years before they spoke again. It was at a party. Jack had a hesitant smile on his face. Gabe kept his distance, knowing that anything he said would probably be wrong. Jack went up to him awkwardly and said, "You were right to tell, Gabe. It was

wrong to ask you to lie for me. I'm just about ready to try college again, this time without the scholarship. Mom and Dad said that they will love me no matter what.

"I'm so sorry for what I said that night. You were right. A live friend beats a dead enemy any day. Except you are not and never were my enemy. You are the best friend I could ever have, Gabe." And he hugged him fiercely. "You forced me to see the truth." But, like with Gloria, it had been a very close call.

An older woman, Naomi, loves her three adult children and speaks about them to any who will listen for a moment in the store or even the elevator. But the plain fact is none of them visit very often, at most once a year for a few days. Those visits are torture for her kids, who feel that everything they say is up for motherly review and brutal critique. And so they lie, for the very same reasons they lied to her as teenagers, the reason we have all lied to our parents: "Get off my back!"

Her three kids, Mindy, Joan and Sam, have invented wonderful lies to please their mother. They contain just a hint of truth, of course. But they are wonderful lies.

Mindy was divorced two years ago and still has not told her mother. Why? She knows that there would be unending recriminations about "how she let such a good man get away." That good man who hit her? That good man who demanded she spend only \$20 a week on herself when he hit the bars and the golf course? That good man who cheated on her and lied about it? Since the kids are at college, she thinks, why bother Mom with the gruesome details?

Joan is a very successful trial attorney. She has done so well that she has a condo on the Upper West Side of Manhattan and a cabin in Vermont. She works and skis and does philanthropic work. She never married. She has never told her Mom about the two abortions she had. Joan doesn't think her mother could take it, that it would break her. She has no desire to hear how much her mother wanted a grandchild from her "because, you know, Joanie, you were always the smartest one. You would have brilliant children. Just brilliant!" She doesn't think her Mom would ever forgive her if she found out about the abortions.

Sam never did find a career. He has a job driving a truck and he is kind of happy, although he wonders if he could have reached higher. He hangs with his pals on weekends, watching the Steelers, Pirates and Penguins and drinking beer. He plays multi-player action games on his three mobile devices. At age 32, he thinks life passed him by and that it is unfair, but he's learned to live with it.

He actually finished college with a degree in English literature. But this knowledge didn't guarantee a job in the new economy. So he tells his mother that he is doing research for a professor part time in addition to driving the truck. She thinks he is on his way to a brilliant future in the sciences. Brilliant! He fears if she knows the truth, she'll fling it in his face at every turn. It's just not worth it to him.

Mindy, Joan and Sam didn't set out to lie so much to their mother. But the gulf between them and her grew so vast it was impossible to bridge her dreams for them and the reality they live. They feel sometimes that they have been sacrificed on the altar of their mother's inflated dreams for them.

And they resent her terribly for that, which explains why they don't visit. Yet, every now and then, they feel a hollow loneliness in the pit of their stomachs. They so want to shed the secrets and lies and demand that their mother accept them for who they are, not what they have or haven't accomplished.

Their friends have tried to play the role of Satan, pushing them to come clean. They say, "After all, she is not going to live forever. Make up with her now or carry a bucket of guilt for years to come." But none of them can face it yet.

Many of us can't either. Lies about money. Lies about adultery. Lies about work. Lies about feeling inadequate. Lies and secrets that are embedded in our stories as much as in the story of Abraham, Sarah and Isaac.

So is that it? Are we all condemned to secrets and lies, if not on the scale of Jack, Mindy, Joan or Sam? We can keep them hidden, but it is costly. It is soul-sucking. It drags at our hearts. Lies weigh more than truth.

But I get it. It takes enormous courage to put down the lie, even as it takes every bit of effort to make Abraham relinquish the knife. It takes a willingness to face others who will feel let down or even betrayed. We doubt we possess that much strength. But we do. All of us do. And this season calls for us to try, whether by writing a letter, calling on the phone or sitting down with someone we've kept secrets from.

Mindy chose the letter. Joan, the phone call. Sam, after a week of beating himself up, made the journey to visit his mom and told her on the second day over lunch.

Since they didn't share their plans with each other, the three revelations came in short order, one after the other. And the three of them were horrified when they realized what happened. One disappointment would be hard enough, but three? Would their mother even survive?

However, each of them reported something amazing. Their mother, after some tears, said she understood. What was more, she waved away their apologies to offer one of her own. "I had no idea I was being so hard on you. You mean more to me than all the achievements and titles in the world. I am ashamed you felt that I pushed you away. I'm no saint, no Sarah. If God asks me for my kids, I'm saying no! No more secrets. No more lies. No more sacrificing my children!"

When Mindy asked about what she would say to the neighbors she was always bragging to, her mother said, “Who gives a damn about my neighbors? You are my children...”

I believe with all my heart that we are able to accept far more truth than we think we can. I believe that the lies we tell, even those that remain hidden forever, damage us in ways I can barely describe.

I believe the very knife in Abraham’s hand is a lie. God never intended for it to be used. The rabbis were right to have Satan knock it out of his hand.

Who will knock the lie out of our hand this day? Who will help us find the courage to own ourselves? You know very well. You and me. You and me alone. We cannot wait for an imaginary Satan to do it for us. We have no need for God’s foil.

The moment is today. The time is now.

Since Gloria knew she would die, she embraced her family with a full heart. Since Jake shared his fears with his parents, they soothed him with their love. Since Mindy, Joan and Sam told their mother the truth of their lives, they are trying to make up for lost time. For as you and I know too well, we live for a brief span and then it is over.

“And Abraham returned to Be’er Sheva.” Alone. Isaac gone. Sarah dead. There is no greater sadness in the whole Torah. Today we refuse to walk the same path. Today we listen to Satan’s urging to share the truth, to refuse both lies and silence. Today we can put down the knife and embrace someone we love. It is a very close thing for us, though. Let us draw close. Closer. Together, together at last.