Misleading is Also a Form of Lying: Thoughts for Parashat Mishpatim, February 14, 2015

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The New York Times of February 6, 2015, included a long article under the caption: “Strains Grow Between Israel and Many Jews in the U.S.” The article focused on unhappiness with the monopoly of Israel’s Orthodox Chief Rabbinate in matters of marriage, divorce and conversion to Judaism. The American Jewish Committee has formed a large and influential task force to press the Israeli government for a “pluralistic” approach, that allows greater freedom for individuals to turn to rabbis of their choice—whether Orthodox or not—or to have options through civil law, rather than only religious law. Among those serving on this task force are Orthodox Jews. Indeed, the chairman, Dr. Dov Zakheim, is Orthodox. The New York Times article listed several Modern Orthodox members of the committee, including me.

It is true that I am on the committee, and it is very true that I have been a longstanding and vocal critic of the Chief Rabbinate’s control of matters pertaining to conversion to Judaism. While I wish the Chief Rabbinate had conducted itself in such a way as to have gained the respect and willing cooperation of all segments of the Jewish community, it has not done so. Indeed, during the recent several decades, it has become increasingly “hareidized,” and has alienated itself from the mainstream of Jews in Israel as well as the Diaspora. The Chief Rabbinate, in the eyes of many, has become an authoritarian, obscurantist clique that seems to have more concern for its own turf than for the wellbeing of the Jewish people.

The Chief Rabbinate is not only opposed by the large number of non-Orthodox Jews in Israel and the diaspora, but is despised by the “Hareidi” establishment as well. Much of the “religious Zionist” community does not view the Chief Rabbinate as representing them either. It turns out that this anachronistic institution has little public support; and yet it wields extraordinary powers of coercion. Its bureaucracy pretends to safeguard halakhic standards, but is often actually increasing unnecessary stringencies and causing much unnecessary grief.

Having said this, I am chagrined by the caption of the New York Times article that focuses on strains “between Israel and many Jews in the U.S.” Because I, and many others, have sharp disagreements with the functioning of Israel’s Chief Rabbinate, this does not meet that “strains” are growing among us. I love Israel, support Israel in every way possible, and pray every day for Israel’s wellbeing. I believe this is true of most, if not all, the people on the AJC task force. Our attempt to address a serious issue that deeply affects our community should not have been marketed as a sign of a rift between Israel and American Jews.

In this week’s Torah portion, we read: “MiDevar Sheker Tirhak.” One must stay very distant from falsehood. The Torah might simply have stated: don’t lie. But it does not only want us to avoid outright lies; it demands that we remove ourselves from anything that promotes falsehood. A half truth is also a lie. A misleading innuendo is also a falsehood.

It is all too fashionable in the media to harp on real and imagined faults of Israel. It makes “news” to present Jews who find fault with Israel. The fact is that there are many like-minded Israelis who very much share the views of those on the AJC task force. The area of controversy is not between American Jews and Israel, but between those who support the monopoly of Israel’s Chief Rabbinate and those who oppose it. To caption an article in the New York Times as “Strains Grow Between Israel and Many Jews in the U.S.” is to frame the issue in an incorrect manner…in a manner that comes close to falsehood.

To work for a stronger, freer and better Israel is not to be seen as a sign of a rift, but as an indication of a keen sense of love and responsibility for the Jewish State. To share views on matters of concern to the entire Jewish people is a sign of a living and positive relationship. MiDevar Sheker Tirhak. The Torah warns not only against outright lies, but against statements that imply falsehood or that create misleading innuendos.

Misleading is also a form of lying.

Angel for Shabbat