Book Review: "Changing the Immutable," by Dr. Marc Shapiro

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Changing the Immutable

By Dr. Marc Shapiro

Since time began, since the more intelligent men and women realized they had ideas they could not share with others, yet they had to speak, they learnt to lie.

Highly respected philosophers did so. The pagan Greek Plato called what they said “noble lies.” The Jewish Maimonides named them “essential truths.” The Moslem Ibn Tufayl gave the lies no name, but wrote a book describing why it is necessary to hide the truth.[1] The Roman Plutarch hid the truth in his famed history “Parallel Lives,” and gave an idealized version the ancient heroes “with the intention of conveying moral examples to imitate or avoid.”[2] They knew that the lies they taught the masses were not facts, but teachings that advance what they considered to be good, what we could call “pedagogical truths,” focusing on education, or “orphaned truths,” unrelated to real truths, or “pious myths.”

As many other philosophers, Maimonides recognized that intelligent people, leaders, clergy, philosophers, and teachers of all kinds need to teach people lies – such as, God spoke to prophets, you will be resurrected, pray and God will help you, this is what God demands, God will punish you unless you do this, there will be a messianic time when all evil will cease – to make people feel good about themselves, feel secure, “know” that there will be a better time, behave properly, provide stability, preserve order, and teach and promote values. Maimonides told

readers of his Guide that he will place both his true ideas and “essential truths” in his Guide so that the common people will find notions in it that support their beliefs while intelligent people will be able to sift the true teachings from the dross.[3]

Even the Bible seemed to sanction lies. Abraham told his servants and his son Isaac that he and Isaac will return from offering a sacrifice while he had every intention when he said this that he would offer Isaac as a sacrifice to God. Jacob misled his father Isaac claiming he was Esau the son that blind Isaac wanted to bless. Moses attempted to persuade Pharaoh to let the Israelites leave Egypt saying they would return after three days. The biblical book Chronicles suppressed the truth contained in the earlier biblical books; they retold the earlier-told tales in a manner that erased mistakes made by biblical heroes, such as King David’s adultery and murder of Bathsheba’s husband. The Chronicle version is “actually far from a detached recording of what happened in the past.”[4] And there are many more examples of dishonesty in the Bible. Abraham ibn Ezra states: “Our sages explained this beautifully, for ‘a prudent man conceals shame.’”[5]

The Talmud recognized a concept halakhah ve’ein morin ken, meaning that although something is technically permitted, the rabbis do not inform the masses of the leniency out of fear that using this permission could have negative ramifications. Nachmanides (1194-1270) contends that this concept is in the Torah which states “It is the glory of God to conceal a thing,”[6]

The rabbis lied and continue to lie for many reasons, such as the interest of peace, to stop people from sinning, to avoid embarrassment, to prevent injury, to collect money to support the study of Torah, to help feed a poor man, to improve a person’s chance of marriage, when one has a mental reservation that what he is saying is not true,[7] for educational reasons, and if the lie leads to a good result. Each of these reasons is subjective; one rabbi may feel that the lie is appropriate while another might strongly disagree. It is as if the rabbi is saying, I can lie if I think it is proper to do so and if I feel that it is better for the person to believe my lie rather than know the truth.

Marc B. Shapiro[8] points this out and shows how this phenomenon continued from ancient time to righteous Jews today, including famed rabbis who lie to other Jews. His book is superb, scholarly, comprehensible, well-documented with copious supportive notes, very readable, and above all eye-opening. He shows that all too many rabbis in the Orthodox community rewrite the past by snipping out of books of prior rabbis and scholars, even well-respected ones, that which

does not fit into their personal world-view. They “insist on viewing the past through the religious needs of the present,” erasing the liberal opinions of the past to obligate others to follow their personal notions of what is right. Organizations such as ArtScroll distort the interpretations of Bible commentators in their ArtScroll commentaries when what is said contradicts their understanding, as they deleted the “offending view” of Rashi’s grandson Rashbam on Genesis 1:5 that in the Bible the day began in the morning. These rabbis are turn their backs to what is true when they are convinced that what was said would lead readers to observances they dislike. Paradoxically, rabbis who make these changes consider themselves traditional, even hereidi, ultra-Orthodox, men who decry the changes wrought by the Reform movement; yet they too are uncomfortable with the past, the history of Judaism and its practices, and feel the need the revise what is most sacred to them, what the Torah actually says and Judaism.

They conceal the conviction of many sages that parts of the Five Books of Moses” were composed after Moses’ death, such as Abraham ibn Ezra and the famed pietistic Rabbi Judah HeHasid who held this post-Mosaic view. They hide the fact that the codifier Moses Isserles felt that it is permissible to drink non-Jewish wine. They censored Joseph Karo’s “Shulchan Arukh” where he states that the “kapporot” ceremony on the day before Yom Kippur in which people transferred their sins to a chicken was a “foolish custom.” They erased the opinion of Rabbi Hayim of Volozhin quoting the Vilna Gaon “that in matters of halakhah one should not give up one’s independent judgment, even if that means opposing a ruling in the “Shulchan Aruch.” They excised the statement of Rabbi Joseph Messas (1892-1974) from his “Mayim Chayim” where he ruled that married women have no obligation to cover their hair, a decision also held by Rabbi Joseph Hayim (1832-1909) and many others. They conceal the ancient decisions by respected rabbis such as Rabbenu Tam, Rabbi Solomon Ganzfred in his “Kitsur Shulchan Arukh,” and others that the “shekiah,” sunset for the purposes of when the Sabbath starts, takes place much later than what is usually regarded as sunset, that the Shabbat begins when it is dark about an hour after the current practice. They obscured the ruling of the highly respected codifier Rabbi Yehiel Mikhel Epstein (1829-1908) that one is allowed to turn on electric lights on festivals. They expunged the opinion of Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch that everyone does not need to devote his life to Torah study and the opinion of Maimonides in his Introduction to his opus “Mishneh Torah” that Jews need not study the Talmud. They erased the Vilna Gaon’s belief that it is only a custom for males to cover their heads and that in Orthodox families in Germany, male Jews only covered their heads when at prayer or saying a blessing. They painted head coverings on the pictures of the Lubavitcher Rebbe, Menachem Mendel Schneerson, and many

others who did not wear a head covering in college. They hide that Rabbi Kook, the first Chief Rabbi of Palestine as well as Maimonides taught that people need to exercise.

Also, hereidi Jews as well as rabbis who are afraid to deviate from them will not mention the words breast, gay, homosexual, rape, or insert the words in their newspapers, and even exclude pictures of women, including that of Hillary Clinton, even though this is not prohibited in the Torah and was not the practice in ancient Judaism.

These are just some of the many examples that Dr. Shapiro gives in his excellent book (with a couple that I added) of how rabbis and others have changed and are continuing to change the immutable Torah.

We could, of course add many more to the couple of hundred example offered by Dr. Shapiro, for Dr. Shapiro notes that he is not giving a complete list of violations. For example, many rabbis today do not reveal that the behaviors they are advocating in their sermons is not taught in the Torah. Also, when these rabbis sermonize today and base their sermons on the "fact" that the "medrish" says such and such, the rabbis do not reveal that there are multiple Midrashim, each saying something somewhat different than the others, and the position they are advocating is not held by other Midrashim.[9]

[1] Plato's "Nobel Lie" is discussed in his Laws 2.663d-e. He lived in Greece between 427 and 347 BCE. Maimonides' "Necessary Truths" is in the Guide of the Perplexed 3:28. In essence, although people may consider this incredibly insulting, philosophers recognize that the vast majority of people need to be taught fraudulent notions and treated in a paternalistic fashion by those who are convinced they know what is best for them. Ibn Tufayl died in 1185. His book is Hayy ibn Yaqzan, University of Chicago Press, 2009.

[2] Donald R. Kelly, Faces of History, New Haven, Conn. 1999. Kelly notes that none of the Roman historians were objective in a modern sense.

[3] It is not easy for readers to identify the "essential truths" and as a result there are Maimonidean scholars who are convinced that Maimonides believed that prophecy is from God, angels exist, God controls people, etc.

[4] In a commentary attributed to Rashi, the Bible and Talmud commentator points to a number of times that the book of Chronicles has a goal to portray King David in a positive fashion.

[5] Proverbs 12:16.

[6] Nachmanides commentary on Numbers 30:2 referring to Proverbs 25:2.

[7] As in the somewhat ridiculous practice of some people of saying a lie while crossing one’s fingers.

[8] Changing the Immutable, How Orthodox Judaism Rewrites its History, By Marc B. Shapiro, The Littman Library of Jewish Civilization, 2015, 347 pages.

[9] Many rabbis use the made-up word they heard in the Yeshivas, a Yiddish mispronunciation of Midrash.

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