

How Much Does a Lie Weigh?

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I'm a native of Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, so I followed the Penn State/Sandusky story closely. I'm sure you're familiar with the details of the case. Clearly, the NCAA feels that a lie weighs a great deal and those who must bear that weight are, now, those who didn't do anything wrong (e.g., prospective players or those who had no knowledge of what Sandusky et al., did).

This leads me to the following question: how much does a lie weigh? Does a lie get heavier or lighter the longer one carries it? Is living a lie a sin? Is telling a lie on a continuous basis corrosive to the teller? To the hearer? What might be the effects of carrying a lie for a long time?

The Talmud (Bavli this time) contrasts the Hebrew words for truth and lie. The truth is the Hebrew word Emet: Aleph-mem-tav. This word is made of the first, middle and last letters of the Hebrew alphabet. The Hebrew word lie is Sheker: Shin-kuf-reish. Those three letters all come right together in the alphabet. So the Talmud (B. Shabbat 104a) says that the truth is much more stable and comprehensive than the narrow source of a lie. Also, the actual Hebrew letters of the word "truth" have two "legs" each whereas the Hebrew letters of the word "lie" have only one "leg". So a lie is unstable in its nature. A lie, says the Talmud, is bound to tip over eventually while the truth will stand, stable.

So I ask it again, and look forward to your answers.

Discussion Questions:

1. How much does a lie weigh?
2. Does it get lighter or heavier with time?
3. Can you think of Biblical/rabbinic sources that support your idea?
4. How can we purify our communities when they are polluted by lies?

As always, looking forward to your insights!