



Reprinted from Moment Magazine Sept/Oct 2016, "Ask the Rabbis" column

"Is it a serious moral failing for a politician to lie?"

Response by Rabbi Peter Schweitzer

Let's not be naïve. "Spinning" or reframing the facts is a job requirement of politicians and political surrogates. But once truth-telling is allowed to slide down the slippery slope, it is easy to see how outright lies can become just as commonplace, and some are clearly whoppers. But are these moral failings or just the way the system works? If so, then the real question is whether the real moral failing is on our part if we believe that what politicians say is the truth or is an ironclad guarantee of how they will act once in office. Is it, likewise, a moral failing if the press give politicians a pass and do not challenge these claims and assertions when there is clear evidence to the contrary?

Of course, the problem with unrestrained and matter-of-fact false-telling (a word that doesn't exist yet, but that should) is that we can never know what to believe. Or who to trust. And this leaves us in a state of disequilibrium. Like having to deal with a capricious deity who acts on a whim and with no sense of predictability and justice.

Instead, we need leaders who may change their minds but are mostly dependable and reliable. And who trust us to handle difficult truths. Along these lines, I believe that doctors who withhold critical prognoses also do us a disservice. And so do religious teachers who perpetuate myths that have long been disproven.