

Honestly, Is It Ever OK To Lie?
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Before my younger sister began kindergarten, my mother told her about all the exciting things that awaited her: new friends, reading, field trips, and more.

When my sister came home from her first day of school, Mom asked her how the day went.

My sister glared at Mom with a fierce scowl: “Mom, you lied to me! You said I would learn to read but I didn’t!”

Slow down, sister. Learning to read takes a long time. Mom didn’t lie to you; she just didn’t tell you that detail.

When we read the full story of Abraham - in today’s Parshat Lech Lecha and next week’s Vayera - we encounter two ethical all-stars telling lies. Yet the same Torah exhorts us to scrupulously tell the truth. So honestly, when is it permitted to lie?

Let’s start with the truth: Exodus 23:7 reads, “*Midvar Sheker Tirhak* - keep far from something false.” In the local context of the verses, this instruction is given to judges to remove themselves from fraudulent claims. But the Talmud broadens this instruction to other examples as well (Shvuot 31a). It’s a charge for each of us. I’ll take it further: not only may we not tell a *Sheker* - a lie - we must even distance ourselves from lies that are told in our presence. This ideal is inspiring, not surprising, and sometimes challenging to uphold. The Torah sets a high bar for honesty.

We have the rule. Now let’s explore two exceptions from Abraham’s story.

Abraham is the first example, who teaches that one can lie to save their life. Soon after he reaches Canaan, he leaves for Egypt to escape a famine. He tells his beautiful wife Sarah, “I know you are a beautiful woman. When the Egyptians see you and think, ‘She is his wife,’ they will kill me and let you live. Please say that you are my sister” [in order to save my life] (Gn. 12:11-13). Here Abraham knows the Egyptians will want to be with Sarah. If they know he’s her husband, they will kill him. He reasons that if they think he’s just her brother, they will not. So Abraham clearly tells his wife to lie - to say they are siblings - in order to save his life. Of course one should lie to save their life. This is not surprising.

While I look at this example through the lens of lying, I and many readers are disturbed by Abraham putting his wife Sarah into a very compromising situation, leaving her alone in the hands of strangers. I’m not ignoring that but also not focusing on that today.

The second time it’s permitted to lie is to preserve peace in a relationship. And we learn this from none other than G-d.

In next week's Parashat Vayera, three visitors to Abraham and Sarah's tent tell them they will have a son next year. Abraham will be 100 years old at the time and Sarah 90. In response, Sarah laughs, and basically says, "Yeah right!" She continues, "My husband is too old" (Gn. 18:12). Remember who's too old in her telling: Abraham.

Next, G-d turns to Abraham, who was out of earshot. G-d asks Abraham, "Why did Sarah laugh, saying, 'Can I really give birth? I'm too old!'" (Gn. 18:13). In G-d's retelling, who is too old? Sarah.

G-d doesn't tell Abraham the whole truth, that Sarah thinks that *Abraham* is too old to have children. This is shocking - G-d is telling a lie! Rashi brings this discrepancy to our attention: "Scripture changed the language of Sarah's reply *Mipnei HaShalom* - for the sake of peace." That is, G-d was concerned about Abraham's feelings being hurt and the damage that might cause between husband and wife. This is always a priority for a strong marriage, but never more so than at *this moment* for Abraham and Sarah, when the window for them having a child finally opened. From the astonishing fact that G-d lied to Abraham, we learn an important truth: Peace outranks truth. When honesty clashes with peace in a relationship, peace comes first.

Let's say someone important to you cooks their first meal in their first apartment or home and invites you as a guest. And they go all out. They set the table with cloth napkins; they prepare a four-course meal; they find a nice wine and even turn on some background music. It's perfectly lovely. And then out comes the new-recipe soup...You take a bite, and wow! does that taste bad. No question about it. But it's clear your host likes it. With eager eyes, your host asks, "How is it?" What do you say? If you tell the real truth, you will crush them. If you tell a white lie, - "I like it!" - you will be dishonest but preserve their self-confidence. I believe the ethical move here is to tell the white lie because it saves them embarrassment, preserves their feelings, and maintains *Shalom*, peace, in your relationship. Peace comes first.

I can't resist two asides.

One happened when I was first dating my wife. One Sunday morning I invited her to my apartment and made biscuits for the two of us...but the biscuits were a total failure. Laura did the right thing by gently acknowledging it and reassuring me anyway. This was the right move because, unlike the previous example with the soup, here I knew it tasted bad. Who knew biscuits were so hard to make?

The second is something I learned from Rabbi David Levin Kruss of Jerusalem. He shared his practice of saying something glowing as soon as his host's first dish came out: "Wow! This looks and smells amazing!" The reason he spoke up before is because that way he wasn't on the hook for speaking after he actually took a bite. This way he was fully honest - the first dish usually does look and smell wonderful - and in the process did not hurt anyone's feelings. Now that's wisdom!

This example of "What do you think about the food?" reminds me of the question "What do you think of my outfit?" I think the same thing applies here too. So long as they will not embarrass themselves by what they're wearing and they're excited enough that their feelings might get hurt,

I see no reason not to say, "You look great!" If either factor changes, however, so might the answer.

This reminds me of a debate in the Talmud between Beit Hillel and Beit Shammai (Ketubot 16b). The two of them were outstanding rabbis who disagreed about many aspects of Jewish Law. Hillel is like the Harlem Globetrotters while Shammai is like the Washington Generals - you know who's going to win before the game even begins! (Though there are a few exceptions where the law follows Shammai).

The Talmud asks the question, "What does one recite while dancing at a wedding? That is, what do you say about the bride? Beit Shammai say, 'You recite praise of the bride as she is.' But Beit Hillel say, 'You say the bride is beautiful.'" We see here that the real dispute is between strict truth and empathy. Beit Shammai champions truth as the ultimate value while Beit Hillel upholds empathy.

Beit Shammai then presses Beit Hillel. "What if the bride were lame or blind? Would you still call her beautiful? After all, the Torah says not to lie!" Beit Shammai's point is that you shouldn't say something you don't mean, and if the bride isn't beautiful, you shouldn't say otherwise.

Beit Hillel responds - I paraphrase here: every bride is beautiful to the groom. And we must avoid hurting feelings. So we are right to say she is beautiful.

Like the Globetrotters, Beit Hillel wins this argument. Empathy - like peace in a relationship - outranks strict truth.

Let nobody misunderstand me today.

There are still very few cases when one should lie. And one must be very careful about it. You're not allowed to lie to prevent someone else from being upset at you for a good reason. If you messed something up and are confronted about it, you still have to be honest and confess, even though that will upset someone else. You can't go around saying just what other people want to hear, even if that will satisfy them in the moment. Because that's deception for no principled reason, like peace. It's all about the *principle*.

This distinction pushes us to raise our awareness of how our statements make the other person feel. It's challenging. But then again, so is real life.

Don't get me wrong: telling the truth is no less important than before I shared these exceptions. But *Shalom* is more important. The Jewish tradition is not *Meikel*/lenient when it comes to truth; it's just more *Machmir*/strict about peace.

Shabbat Shalom!