

I'M ONLY SPEAKING THE TRUTH!

by Torah.org

Actually, only one type of Lashon Hara (lit. "evil speech") reflects lies. Speaking lies (slander) is called "motzi shem ra" - literally spreading a bad name. It's pretty easy to imagine how lies, and even exaggeration, can unfairly damage someone's reputation. There are two commandments that explicitly prohibit lying:

1. Lo tisa shema shav - you shall not utter a false report. Ex. 23:1)
 2. Midavar sheker tirschak - from a false matter you shall distance yourself. (Ex. 23:7)
- Note the wording of the mitzvot--neither of them tell us to say the truth, but rather to refrain from telling lies. However, two cases in the Talmud actually advocate lying under certain circumstances.

1. Some of you are probably familiar with the dispute between Beis Shammai and Beis Hillel: *"keitzad merakdim lifnei hakallah - how does one dance before the bride?"* They address the issue of how to describe the (ugly) kallah to her groom: Beis Hillel advises one to say "she's beautiful" and Beis Shammai says "be honest".

The Talmudic commentaries deal with the conflict between the position of Beis Hillel and the commandments that we mentioned above. The proposed resolutions are:

- a. The section in Exodus refers to perjury (court situations) so that there is no actual commandment prohibiting lying in general;
- b. The beauty is the bride's insides, her good deeds;
- c. shalom (peace) is an overriding factor.

(Note: (a) does not mean that we can lie indiscriminately. There are plenty of sources on a more Rabbinic level that extoll the virtues of truth as a Jewish value.)

2. The other case discussed in the Talmud involves someone who has purchased an item at a "no exchanges, no returns" market. The Talmud instructs us to say that it's a nice buy, regardless of what it is in reality. In fact, unlike the "keitzad merakdim" case, ALL authorities agree that the friend should compliment the purchase. (The Tosafos suggest that in case (1) perhaps Beis Shammai did not want to make a public ruling advocating a lie, though perhaps the rationale of either (a) or (c) is applicable.) Both of these cases show that truth is not always the deciding factor in ethical Jewish speech. In fact, the definition of Lashon Hara does not reflect truth or falsehood at all, but the damage that it can inflict.

But sometimes we speak Lashon Hara because we forget that in many cases, truth can be subjective (like "beauty is in the eye of the beholder") or elusive, in that we don't always know the whole picture.

One of the most fundamental commandments related to the subject of Lashon Hara is Leviticus 19:15 - "*B'tzedek tishpot amitecha*," in righteousness shall you judge your kinsman. This verse commands us to give the benefit of the doubt.

Very often there are situations in which several "stories" are possible. In the case of a G-d fearing person, we are expected to judge favorably, even to believe that there may have been facts of which we were not aware. Often gossip reflects a denial of the possibility of mitigating circumstances, that can shed light on the person's intentions or other background information.

It is my personal goal, in giving this list, to raise my own awareness of situations in which I want to "think twice" before I speak (or judge). I would be interested to know what some of your goals are, as well as any specific topics that you would like to see covered in this list.

Commandments

Table of Contents