

ACT YOUR AGE

by Rabbi Daniel Travis

"My journey through life has lasted 130 years," replied Yaakov. "The days of my life have been few and hard, and I have not lived as long as my fathers did in their journey through life." (Bereshith 47:9)

Pharaoh was astonished when he saw Yaakov, for Yaakov appeared to be much older than he actually was. Yaakov thus explained to Pharaoh that his aged appearance was a result of his troubled life and was not a reflection of his true age.¹

Lying about one's age has become so commonplace that people are not even aware that there may be something wrong with it. Once, someone who was filling out a form for social security could not decide whether to record his age as forty-one in order to get social security a year earlier, or thirty-nine in order to get a better life insurance policy. He asked a Rav's advice in the matter, and the Rav responded by asking why he didn't just tell the truth. The person replied, "Rav, I never even thought of that!"²

It is certainly forbidden to lie about one's age when financial issues are involved. Thus one cannot list inaccurate information about one's age when filling out any form with financial ramifications, such as a job application, which could lead to the applicant's being hired under false pretenses. Likewise, if a bus ticket or entrance to a museum costs less for a child or a senior citizen, it is forbidden to misrepresent one's age in order to receive a discount.

If someone is asked his age (when there are no financial considerations), and he is uncomfortable or embarrassed to answer, he is not obligated to tell them. The fact that someone asks us a question does not obligate us to provide an answer.³ The Torah's attitude, however, is that an older person should be proud of his age, not embarrassed, for advanced age is a sign of wisdom and life experience. We are obligated to respect and honor an elderly person, Jew or non-Jew, by rising in his presence and giving him a supporting hand when needed.⁴ Yaakov made sure Pharaoh understood he was younger than he looked - not from vanity, or because he didn't want to be treated with undeserved respect, but because of his innate truthful nature.

In certain cases it is forbidden to hide physical signs of one's age in order to make people think one is younger. Although a woman may dye her hair, a man is forbidden to pluck or dye white hair on his head.⁵ A young woman once wanted to marry an older righteous man. The man would not consent to marry her until he had shown her the physical signs of his aging. Because of his sincerity, they merited children who were Torah scholars.⁶

1. *Ramban*
 2. Heard from Rav Pesach Krohn
 3. Heard from Rav Yitzchak Berkowitz
 4. Shulchan Aruch, Yoreh De'ah 244:7.
 5. Ibid. 182:6. This is included in the prohibition of a man dressing like a woman.
 6. Sefer Chasidim 379.
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