

DISTANCED FROM FALSEHOOD

by Rabbi Daniel Travis

Rabbi,

Please forgive me. I am not a Torah scholar and I don't know Hebrew and I was just wondering if maybe G-d didn't deviate from relaying the facts to Avraham. I also don't know Talmud and so maybe my understanding of what a "fact" is, is incomplete.

Is it possible that when referring to a married couple, that one party is equal to the other and so substituting Sarah's name for Avraham's is still keeping in line with the facts? ... and when you speak about someone else, someone who was also made in Hashem's image, that you speak of yourself -- as Sarah did when she spoke of her husband?

I was just wondering ...
Wendy

Dear Wendy,

Your question is excellent and I will try to answer it with the following two essays.

In any case, she is my sister; she is the daughter of my father, but not the daughter of my mother, and she became my wife. Bereshith 20:12

When Avraham first encountered Avimelech (in Bereshith 20:2), danger to his life prevented Avraham from revealing that Sarah was his wife. Now, when confronted by Avimelech, Avraham explains that he had deviated from the truth as little as possible, for technically, Sarah was his sister.¹ Nevertheless, his words beg elucidation. When he had said that Sarah was his sister he certainly created the impression that she was not his wife.

The fact that she was technically his sister might seem irrelevant if not for the halachah that one should try to make sure that one's words are as close to the technical truth as possible. If it is possible to make peace without deviating from the facts, one must do so even when it requires tremendous effort.² This is understandable: if one is able to avoid falsehood completely, certainly one should follow that path. However, if one is in a situation in which deviating from the facts is the only option, it is best to make a statement which is misleading but technically true. In certain

situations it is better to forego technical truth and opt for a higher truth, such as protecting your life or peace between husband and wife.

When the Torah prohibits lying, it employs the phraseology, "Distance yourself from sheker."³ Distancing oneself implies that even when one is permitted to deviate from the facts one must stay as far away from sheker as possible. In this vein, Targum Onkelos translates this verse as, "From a word of sheker be distant." This implies that even if one cannot make a statement which is one hundred percent true, one must at least make sure that all of the words are technically true. In other words, there should be some way in which it is possible to demonstrate that your words are consistent with what really happened. Distance from falsehood must be a high priority.

Many authorities opine that it is never permitted to say something which is a total deviation, and that there must be some true connotation associated with what you say.⁴ Yaakov exemplifies this course of action. Although prophetic instruction forced him to say that he was Esav, he made sure there was a truthful connotation to his words.⁵ Another way to distance oneself from falsehood is by not deviating from factual integrity on a regular basis, for this will accustom a person to lying.⁶ We must remember that even when one is permitted to deviate from factual integrity, one must still distance themselves from falsehood and stay as close to the truth as possible.

An immigrant and a resident I am with you. Bereshith 23:4

If Avraham merely meant to describe his own status, he should have simply said, "I am an immigrant and a resident." The righteousness weigh every word carefully, and the nuances of even the slightest departure from normal speech patterns must be explained. This is especially true of Avraham, who was one of the most powerful orators of his generation, as evinced by the vast number of people he influenced. If so, why did Avraham phrase his statement in such an awkward fashion?

In truth, the land actually belonged to Avraham, for God had promised it to him. Therefore it was Avraham who had the rights of residence there, not the Hittites, to whom he was speaking. Nevertheless he chose not to intimidate them, and he was permitted to tell them that they were the rightful residents, for the sake of peace. Avraham expressed himself to the people in an ambiguous way. He said, "An immigrant and a resident I am with you," which could have been interpreted either that they were the residents and he the immigrant, or that they were the immigrants and he the resident. Even in a situation in which one is allowed to deviate from the truth, one should try to stay as close to the truth as possible.⁷

Staying as close to the truth as one can is always the best policy. Even if one is allowed to deviate from factual integrity, one should consider first whether there is any way to deal with the situation completely truthfully. One who is careful always to be honest and to remain distant from falsehood will find that he will not be forced to lie.⁸ In difficult situations, when stating the factual truth is impossible, he will be able to find a way to keep quiet, or will find something to say that could be

interpreted as the truth.

Once when Rav Elyah Lopian was visiting a poor family, the host offered him something to eat. Rav Elyah would not accept the offer, for the Rambam writes that if someone is lacking the means to provide for himself and those who depend on him, it is considered theft to eat from his table.⁹ Rav Elyah faced a dilemma, since if he refused outright, his host would be insulted, so he told his host that his doctor forbid him to eat that type of food. Later, his students asked him whether it was true that his doctor had forbidden him to eat such food. Rav Elyah replied that the Rambam, who was an excellent doctor, wrote that it is forbidden to take food from someone who does not have enough for himself, so indeed he had spoken the truth.¹⁰ In this situation, although Rav Elyah was allowed to deviate from the facts in order to avoid transgressing the halachah, since he was a man of truth, he found something to say which was not inconsistent with the factual truth.¹¹

Rabbi,

I guess I just cannot imagine Hashem and shekar (because it separates) in the same sentence. I guess we humans are already separate and are capable -- though hopefully with great strain -- of straying off the line.

Wendy

Dear Wendy,

You are right Hashem is Total Truth and has no connection whatsoever to even the minutest iota of falsehood. Yet at times Hashem does things that are completely inconsistent with His "real" nature purely for the sake of teaching us how to act. For example when He asked for council in Bereishis 1:26. In truth all of our character traits are supposed to be based on how Hashem acts, and therefore we always need Him to set the standard.

All the best,
Rabbi Daniel Yaakov Travis

¹ *Malbim*.

² Chofetz Chaim Rechiluth 1:8; Rav Chaim Kanievsky, Masechet Kutim Ch. 30.

³ Shemoth 23:7.

⁴ Chatham Sofer, Responsa 6:59; Aruch le'Ner, Yevamoth 65b; Sefer Chasidim 1061.

⁵ Bereshith 27:19-24.

6 Yam Shel Shlomo, Yevamoth 6:46, Responsa Chofetz Chaim 19 (Rav Chaim Palagi) and Meam Loez Shemoth 23:7. A halachic authority should be consulted.

7 Ohel Yaakov. A halachic authority should always be consulted.

8 Sefer Chasidim 1061.

9 Laws of Repentance 4:4.

10 MiDevar Sheker Tirchak, p. 100.

11 Kaf HaChayim 565:36, and Shulchan Gavohah, Orach Chaim 565.

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