

# FACING THE TRUTH

*by Rabbi Daniel Travis*

*Yehudah, your brothers shall acknowledge you. Your hands shall be on your enemy's necks; your father's sons shall bow to you. (Bereshith 49:8)*

Yaakov blessed Yehudah that he be rewarded measure-for-measure for the outstanding deed he had performed. "Just as you weren't embarrassed to admit the truth regarding Tamar," said Yaakov, "so too shall others admit that the kingship of Israel is yours."<sup>1</sup> However, did Yehudah really have a choice when he acted as he did? Had he not admitted the truth, he alone would have borne responsibility for the death of Tamar and the children she was carrying! If so, did this act truly earn him the tremendous reward of kingship over the Jewish people?

Yehudah could easily have found some other way to spare Tamar's life, without revealing the truth, that was so humiliating to him. Had he done so, however, Tamar would have been left with a blemished reputation. Disregarding his own honor, Yehudah admitted to the whole truth, redeeming Tamar's reputation in the process.<sup>2</sup>

Throughout the generations, the willingness to admit a mistake has been the hallmark of effective Jewish leaders and decision-makers. If one sees that a judge in a beith din has erred in a specific ruling, the halachah is that one must inform him of his error. When he is so informed, the judge may not build a tower of logical proofs in support of his position; rather he must review both sides of the case objectively, in order to arrive at the truth.<sup>3</sup> Although disagreeing with a judge may seem to reflect a lack of respect, in fact just the opposite is true; pointing out an error affords a judge the chance to arrive at the truth! It is forbidden to remain silent in such cases, for the Torah commands us to distance ourselves from sheker. <sup>4</sup>

We need not be concerned that people will lose respect for a Rav if he admits that he made a mistake. When Rav Chaim Soleveichick accepted the position of Rav of Brisk, he appointed Rav Simcha Zelig Reiger to head the beith din of the city. Reb Chaim later explained that he had chosen Reb Simcha Zelig for the position because he knew that Reb Simcha Zelig possessed the strength of character to admit he was wrong, even after he had issued a final ruling. Similarly, when Rav Chatzkel Abramsky became Rav, he answered "I don't know" to the very first question that was posed to him, and he went on to become one of the great leaders of the Jewish People.<sup>5</sup> People admire someone who values truth and integrity enough that he will admit a mistake.

**Response to a reader's question:**

*Dear Rabbi Travis,*

*Regarding last weeks class, does embarrassment at being discovered in a lie make any difference, other than to dissuade us from lying? Cheryl Intrater*

Dear Cheryl,

The power of speech is the mechanism which puts us in "G-d's Image." Therefore if possible, even if a person has to suffer embarrassment he should try and tell the truth, as seen from the following essay. There is perhaps no nobler act than this, and in the long run it will gain him the respect of others.

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1. *Kli Yakar on Bereshith 49:8.*
  2. Rav Leib Chasman, Or Yahel.
  3. Choshen Mishpat 17:8.
  4. Shavuoth 32a; Choshen Mishpat 9:7 However one must speak respectfully, prefacing the correct halachah by saying "Didn't my teacher tell me that..." The Responsa Torah Lishmah (Ben Ish Chai) 249 adds that this is so even regarding an obvious mistake such as a verse of the Torah.
  5. MiDevar Sheker Tirschak, p. 152.
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