

FEAR INDUCED LIES - RESPONSE TO QUESTION

by Rabbi Daniel Travis

Dear Rabbi Travis,

Does the Torah's prohibition of "Distance yourself from falsehood" apply in a case where someone finds himself in a situation where he feels "uncomfortable" or "afraid" to tell the truth?

Thank you,
Jonathan

As we told my lord [Yosef], we have an elderly father and a young [brother] who is a child of his old age. The boy's brother is dead. (Bereshith 44:20)

Rashi explains that the brothers thought Yosef was alive - so much so that when they first came to Egypt they searched the city to see if they could find him. If so, how could Yehudah, the progenitor of the royal family of Israel, make a statement that was so obviously untrue? Yehudah claimed Yosef was dead simply because he was afraid.¹ Yehudah feared that if he admitted that this brother was still alive, the Viceroy of Egypt would demand that they bring him to Egypt as well. Their inability to comply with his demand would have put them in a very dangerous situation indeed. Since Yehuda thought that his life was in danger, he was permitted to say that Yosef was dead.²

We often find ourselves caught off guard and we have no time to think. Under such high-pressure circumstances we may feel tempted to tell "a little white lie." At times we may fabricate details in order to cover up something that is uncomfortable to reveal. In the final analysis, even Yehudah, who was permitted to act as he did, suffered more embarrassment than he would have had he through speaking the truth. This is not uncommon; often our "little white lies" lead to more problems than we would have experienced had we spoken the truth.

Once when a very wealthy man visited the Chofetz Chaim, the man told him that they had met before, and that he was sure the Chofetz Chaim remembered who he was. The Chofetz Chaim responded that he received many visitors, and he could not honestly say that he remembered everyone who came to visit him. One of the Chofetz Chaim's students was standing with him at the time, and tried to convince the wealthy man that the Chofetz Chaim in fact did remember him, but was not admitting it because of his great humility. When the student made this claim, the Chofetz Chaim asserted that he did not remember who the man was.

After the man left, the student apologized to the Chofetz Chaim for having intruded, and explained that he had feared that since this man was a patron of the yeshivah, the fact that the Chofetz Chaim did not remember him might affect his donations to the yeshivah in the future. The student did not want the yeshivah to suffer financial loss. The Chofetz Chaim responded that the Torah's prohibition against speaking sheker is all-inclusive. The Torah makes no exception to this halachah in cases which might prove difficult for a yeshivah.

Although one must tell the truth even when circumstances make it uncomfortable to do so, it is natural for people to try to hide or distort the truth when it would prove embarrassing. For this reason, we must be careful not to ask someone a question that we suspect he will be afraid or embarrassed to answer. If we see someone speaking privately to another person, we must not ask what they were discussing.³ If someone missed a wedding or other simchah (celebration) that we have held, we should not ask him why they were not there.⁴ In situations such as these, people will often make up an excuse that is not true rather than confess the real reason, so in a sense our inquiry might lead them to speak falsely. Just as we must speak the truth at all times, we must also do what we can to help others to speak only the truth.

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1. *Rashi on Bereshith 44:20.*
 2. Responsa Lev Chaim 1:5.
 3. Sefer Chasidim 1062.
 4. Niv Sefathayim, part 2 siman 21.

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