

HOSPITALITY

by Rabbi Daniel Travis

When Yaakov heard that there was food in Egypt, he said to his sons, "Why do you put on an appearance [of being well stocked with provisions]?" (Bereshith 42:1)

Yaakov rebuked his sons because their actions revealed to the evil children of Esav and Yishmael that they had ample provisions.¹ Since Esav and Yishmael were their relatives, Yaakov feared that they would come ask him for food. He therefore sent his sons to Egypt to buy food, so that Esav and Yishmael would assume that Yaakov's family lacked sufficient food even for themselves.²

Why would Yaakov - the pillar of truth - try to deceive Esav and Yishmael in this situation? In fact, his actions were proper and correct. Our Sages tell us that one should act in a way which will ensure that undesirable guests will not come to "eat a host out of house and home."³ Therefore, if a guest has been treated well by his host, and is later questioned by one whom the host might not appreciate having as a guest, he should try to avoid describing the good treatment he received. If there is no way to avoid answering the question, he may give an answer that is less than absolutely true in order to spare the host financial loss. If he were to tell the full truth, the generous host might be pestered constantly by people looking for a free meal.⁴

If a person should not give an overly positive response about his host's hospitality, what should he say? It is forbidden to speak about the host in a way that is at all derogatory, for that would constitute lashon hara.⁵ The best alternative, whenever possible, is to avoid answering the question at all.⁶ If this is impossible, he should say that the treatment he received was just average.⁷

When issuing invitations, the host must also consider the question of honesty. Is a host guilty of genevath da'ath (deception) if he invites someone to his home even if he is fairly certain that the potential guest will refuse the invitation? If he is absolutely sure that the guest will not accept the invitation, yet persists in inviting him in order to curry favor in his eyes, this is considered deception and is forbidden.⁸ If, however, there is any chance at all, no matter how small, that the guest might accept, and he really does want him to come, he is permitted to invite him.⁹

1. Rashi on Bereshith 42:1.

2. Sifthei Chachamim on Bereshith 42:1.

3. Bava Metziah 23b.

4. See also Chofetz Chaim, Hilchoth Lashon Hara 9:3 where he writes that this halachah applies to monetary loans as well.
5. Sefer Dibroth Moshe, Bava Metzia 31a; Rema, Choshen Mishpat 262:21.
6. See Ritva and Meiri on Bava Metzia 31a.
7. Maharal ibid.
8. Rashi, Chulin 94b.
9. Shulchan Aruch HaRav, Hilchoth Onah and Genevath Da'ath 14.

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