

LIFE OR DEATH II

by Rabbi Daniel Travis

"...That it will go well with me for your sake, and through your efforts my life will be spared."
(Bereshith 12:13)

Here Avraham is requesting of Sarah that she claim to be his sister. The words "it will go well with me," refer to nothing less than the saving of Avraham's life, for one is not required to tell the truth if it could cause death (1). Therefore, when Avraham was asked what was in the crate in which Sarah lay hidden, he responded that it contained only wheat (2). Although it was not true, this response was absolutely permissible.

Although it is permitted to deviate from the truth to save a life, this leniency does not apply in every situation. It is forbidden under any circumstances for someone to say that he is an idol worshipper, even to save his life. If the claim that he worships idols would save his life, it is clear that his adversaries have decided to kill him because of the fact that he is Jewish and he rejects their beliefs. In that case, claiming to be an idol worshipper would be tantamount to saying that he accepts their ideologies (3).

Rav Tzvi Meiselman was a doctor in an American field hospital during World War II. The head of the hospital was extremely anti-Semitic, and Rav Meiselman did everything he could to hide the fact that he was an observant Jew. Eventually the head of the hospital caught on to his peculiar behavior and confronted him, asking him which faith he adhered to. Rav Meiselman unequivocally replied that he was Jewish, and as a punishment was sent to the front line. That hospital was later bombed. Everyone in it was killed, while Rav Meiselman lived for many years after the war (4).

If someone is asked directly which religion he believes in, as in the above story, one must tell the truth. However, if at all possible, one must avoid being killed. It is therefore permitted to make a statement which may be misconstrued by others, such as a statement that would imply that one is not Jewish, although one has not actually said so (5). Rav Chaim Shor (author of *Torath Chaim*) described just such a situation. When a certain great rav was asked by the border guards if he was Jewish he responded "kein," which means "no" in German and "yes" in Hebrew. They allowed him to pass, and he fled to safety (6). We may well ask how the border patrol could have been so easily duped. Would not his clothing have given him away as a Jew? The answer is that he had dressed himself as a non-Jew, for one is permitted to dress oneself in a way that disguises one's true identity, if doing so will save one's life (7).

1. Radak on Bereshith 12:13. 2. Midrash Tanchuma 5. 3. Rosh, Avodah Zarah 2:4. See also Sefer Chasidim 702, which cites an exception to this principle. 4. Heard from Rav Moshe Meiselman. 5. Shulchan Aruch, Yoreh De'ah 157:2. 6. Torath Chaim, Avodah Zara 17a. 7. Nemukey Yosef, Avodah Zara 40a.

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