

LIVING TRUTH

by Rabbi Daniel Travis

When she [Tamar] was being taken out [to be burned], she sent [the collateral which she held as security] to her father-in-law with the message, "I have conceived through the man who is the owner of these essays." [When Yehudah came she said,] "Please identify who is the owner of this seal, this wrap and this staff." (Bereshith 38:25)

Tamar did not wish to embarrass Yehudah publicly, so she merely hinted to him that she was not guilty of prostitution. Rather, she had drawn Yehudah into a situation in which he would father her children, which was actually his responsibility under the circumstances.¹ Had Yehudah not taken the hint, he might have killed Tamar, along with the twins she was carrying. We may well ask how anyone can live with the responsibility of being a judge, a position which may force him to impose the death penalty - perhaps incorrectly - as Yehudah almost did? A small error on the judge's part could lead him to spill innocent blood!

In prohibiting falsehood, the Torah informs us that guarding oneself against falsehood is "insurance" that one will not be misled in this way. "Distance yourself from falsehood," says the Torah, and immediately afterwards it says, "The innocent and the righteous you shall not kill."² From the juxtaposition of these two phrases we learn that someone who is meticulous about avoiding all falsehood will never find himself the cause of the death of an innocent person. Because Yehudah put his honor aside in deference to the truth, he was saved from spilling innocent blood. Someone who deceives another, on the other hand, is considered as if he killed him.³

Not only does truth protect the lives of those with whom one comes in contact; it protects one's own life as well. This point is dramatically illustrated by the story of a young man who wished to donate blood. His father took him to the hospital for that purpose, but when they arrived, they noticed a sign stating that only someone over the age of seventeen was permitted to give blood. Nevertheless, the son, whose seventeenth birthday was but two weeks away, pleaded with his father to allow him to give blood. The father was always very strict about acting only in accordance with the truth, and he would not give in; he simply refused to allow his son to give blood. The boy returned home, greatly disappointed. Not long afterwards, the boy was injured in a car accident. His doctors said that had the boy been allowed to lie about his age and donate blood, he would not have survived the accident.⁴

Rav Yaakov Kamenetsky was one of a number of righteous individuals who attributed their longevity to the fact that they were always careful to tell only the truth.⁵ They knew that the truth protects one's life.

Footnotes:

¹ See commentary of Ramban on Bereshith 38:26.

² Shemoth 23:1.

³ Ma'alothe Hamidoth, Ch. 3.

⁴ Echoes of the Magid, pp. 140-142.

⁵ Moresheth Avot, Bamidbar, p. 62.

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