

# OBVIOUSLY FALSE

*by Rabbi Daniel Travis*

*Perhaps my father will touch me.... (Bereshith 27:12)*

It seems logical that Yaakov would not have wanted his father to touch him and so to discover his true identity, but the words of the verse do not support this supposition. If Yaakov did not wish to be caught lying, he should have used the word "pen" meaning lest [my father will touch me]. In Hebrew, the word "ulai" (perhaps) implies a desire for the result to happen, showing that Yaakov in fact wanted his father to touch him.<sup>1</sup>

Yaakov was in fact hoping that his father would catch him in his attempted deception. Although he felt compelled to do as his mother Rivka had told him, Yaakov acted in opposition to his own will; his love for truth was so strong that this act of deceit was utterly distasteful to him. He reasoned that if Yitzchak knew from the start that Yaakov's behavior was all a ruse, there would be no real falsehood involved. Yaakov actually wanted to be caught lying immediately, so that anything he might say would not be halachically considered a "lie."<sup>2</sup>

In contrast, the ancient Greek philosopher Socrates wished to ban all playwrights and poets from Greece since, he said, their works were filled with falsehood. While this may sound like a noble gesture, it has absolutely nothing to do with the Jewish perspective. Since everyone knows that fictional plays and poems are not true, and are never presented as truth, they are not considered to be falsehood. If such plays serve a constructive purpose, such as teaching proper values or making Jewish concepts more real, it is even praiseworthy to participate in them and to promote them.

Although something that is obviously false does not fall into the category of sheker, if such an expression of untruth serves no constructive purpose, we should avoid it. The Elders of Athens once asked Rav Yehoshua ben Chanina to make a false statement, so he told them that a mule can give birth. Since they viewed truth telling merely as a necessity to preserve order in society they replied, "That's not a lie. Everyone knows that a mule can't bear offspring!" Rav Yehoshua's response to them was, "That is precisely what makes it a lie!" The Jewish view is that lying is not merely a breach of social etiquette; rather it is intrinsically bad.<sup>3</sup>

Sometimes in friendly conversation we may wish to pass on some tall tale we have heard. This is not prohibited, but it is better to avoid doing so because of the element of falsehood in it.<sup>4</sup> However, it is forbidden to relate such a tale in a way that implies that it is true, because in doing so one is deceiving the listener.<sup>5</sup>

1. *See Rashi on Bereshith 24:39.*
  2. Maharatz Chiyoth, Makoth 24a as cited in Titein Emeth L'Yaakov (Rav Yaakov Kamenetsky).
  3. Bechoroth 8b according to the explanation of Toldoth HaAdam 2:4.
  4. Sha'arei Teshuvah 3:181.
  5. Imre Baruch on the Turei Even Megilah 20.
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