

DISTANCE YOURSELF FROM FALSEHOOD PART 1

by Rabbi Yehonasan Gefen

In the midst of outlining the laws for Judges the Torah tells us; "Distance yourself from falsehood."¹ In this context it teaches that a Judge must strive to cling to the truth in his assessment of the case in hand. However, the Rabbis teach that this commandment is not restricted to the Jewish Law courts, rather it applies to many aspects of our everyday life. Indeed it is one of the most important and yet easily misunderstood commands in the Torah. Over the next few weeks we hope to define clearly what does and does not constitute falsehood.²

It is commonly assumed that falsehood is dependent on whether the words that one speaks are technically accurate or not - if one can say words that are technically accurate then there is a tendency to assume that it is permitted to say them even if they are actually misleading. For example, John phones Bill because Bill owes John money and John wants to collect the debt. Bill's wife picks up the phone but Bill has no desire to speak to John and wants to hide the fact that he is in fact home and available to speak to John. Therefore he steps outside the house and tells his wife to say that he is not home. This is technically true - he is now not actually in the house. Is this permitted? The answer is that this is in fact a transgression of the Torah's command to distance oneself from falsehood. Why is this the case, she did not say anything untrue? The answer is that the Torah's definition of falsehood is not based merely on the words that are said - what is of far more significance is the message being conveyed. If that is misleading then it is forbidden to speak that way³ even if the words are technically true. In this case, John is not really concerned as to whether Bill is standing inside the house or just outside it - he wants to know if Bill is available to speak to about the debt⁴ and the truth of the matter is that Bill is indeed available.

We now understand the first aspect of the prohibition to lie- that one cannot mislead other people even if the words are technically true. This is very important, because it teaches us the principle behind this command. The Torah does not want us to go around misleading and tricking people but saying things that are technically true. The Torah wants us to be intrinsically honest people and not spend our time deceiving people.

¹ Mishpatim, 23:7.

² There are a number of facets to these laws and it is important to note that with regard to this law in particular we cannot apply what is written in these essays until they are all completed. Even then, it

is strongly advisable to not make a personal judgment in specific cases, rather to ask a Rabbinic authority for his guidance.

³ There are cases where it may be permitted to mislead people but at present we are discussing the majority of situations where there is no special leniency to lie.

⁴ We deliberately made this case one in which John had every right to speak to Bill. However, as we will discuss in the coming weeks, in situations where John has no right to demand Bill's time, then it may be permitted to lie in some form.

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