

DISTANCE YOURSELF FROM FALSEHOOD PART 3

by Rabbi Yehonasan Gefen

In the past two weeks we defined falsehood as misleading people, and we saw that it is forbidden to mislead someone even if the words are technically true. Moreover, there is nothing wrong with saying technically untrue statements if the message being conveyed is not deceptive¹.

Within the category of misleading, there are two levels of falsehood, one is forbidden by the Torah and the other is only forbidden by the Rabbis. What is the difference?

One only transgresses the Torah prohibition of falsehood if one of the following criteria is met.

1. The speaker is misleading the other person about information that he deserves or needs to know.
2. The person being lied to will be negatively effected by the falsehood.

Examples of this are:

1. John wants to buy an item from Dave and Dave deliberately lies about the quality of this item so that John will buy it. By lying, Dave transgresses the Torah commandment of falsehood because his lie damages John.
2. Dave owes John money and it is time to pay him back, Dave cannot lie and say that he is unable to pay John if in truth he can, because John has a right to know that Dave does indeed have the money.²

However, if the lie is not directly relevant to the other person's life and he has no right to the pertinent information then there is no Torah prohibition of falsehood. It nonetheless remains forbidden by the Rabbis to lie in this way for no valid reason. Nonetheless, within this level of falsehood there are a number of extenuating circumstances where the Rabbis actually permitted one to lie. Included among valid reasons to lie when the other person has no right to this information include; privacy, humility, keeping the peace.

Examples of this are;

1. Brian is going on a date and does not want his friend Bill to know about it. When Bill asks Brian where he is going, Brian is allowed to lie³ because Bill has no right to this information and it is not relevant to his life.

2. Sarah is very successful in college. She is allowed to downplay or even lie about her grades if she does not want people to give her credit.

3. Many years earlier, Dan financially harmed Scott. These events are now distant history and there would no benefit for Scott to know what Dan did so long ago, it would only be the cause of considerable enmity. In such a case, Steve may be allowed to lie to Scott about Dan's actions.

It should of course be noted that each case should be analyzed separately because the specific details in that situation could effect the law. Should such a case arise where it seems permissible to lie, it is advisable to ask an Orthodox Rabbi before proceeding further.

¹ The example we cited was announcing a wedding time one hour before it will actually begin - this is not forbidden if it is understood in that society that weddings generally start one hour late.

² There is one type of extenuating situation in which a person may be allowed to lie in such a way - this will be discussed in future weeks.

³ It should be noted that even when it is permissible to lie, it is nonetheless always better to avoid technically lying where possible, this will be discussed further in future weeks.

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