

DISTANCE YOURSELF FROM FALSEHOOD PART 4

by Rabbi Yehonasan Gefen

Last week we differentiated between two types of falsehood; one is when lying to someone denies him information that he deserves or causes him some kind of damage. For example, deliberately deceiving a prospective customer about the quality of an item. This form of falsehood is forbidden by the Torah.

The second kind is when the lie is not directly relevant to the other person, and does not harm him in any way. An example of this is lying about a specific detail in one's personal life that is of no concern to anyone else. This form of falsehood is not forbidden by the Torah, but the Rabbis forbade it. There are certain circumstances in which it is permitted to lie in this way. For example, for the sake of maintaining peace, privacy, or not hurting someone's feelings.

With regard to the form of falsehood that is prohibited by the Torah there is one specific circumstance in which one may be permitted to lie; when another person is trying to trick or lie to you then you may be allowed to deceive him. This leniency is derived from the story in the Torah involving Jacob deceiving his father Isaac: Isaac had two sons, Esau and Jacob, Esau was the elder and was Isaac's favorite. Isaac believed he was righteous and therefore wanted to give the main blessing to Esau and not Jacob. Isaac's wife, Rebecca, knew that Esau was really an evil man and had deceived his father into believing that he was righteous. She knew that there would be a terrible consequences if Esau received the blessing. Therefore she persuaded her other son, Jacob, to pretend that he was Esau and thereby deceive Isaac into giving the blessing to him.

The commentaries ask how it was permissible for Jacob to blatantly mislead Isaac in this way. They explain that Esau himself had spent his whole life deceiving Isaac, and that it was permissible to resort to falsehood in order to undermine the deceit that he had perpetrated. Lying to overcome a liar is not considered a transgression of the Torah's command against falsehood.

It is very important to note that this leniency only applies to very specific situations and that it is very easy for one to decide that his competitor is a deceitful person and therefore it is permissible to use misleading tactics in order to overcome him. This is generally an invalid form of reasoning - it is only permissible to use such tactics when it is very clear that the other person is blatantly acting deceitfully and even then it is highly advisable to consult with an Orthodox Rabbi without deciding such matters oneself.

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