

CHAPTER 5, LAW 7(D) - TRUTH VERSUS PEACE

by Rabbi Dovid Rosenfeld

(End of Law 7, earlier parts quoted in previous classes):

He [the Torah scholar] should not speak dishonestly (lit., 'change his words'), nor should he add to or detract from his words, except for the sake of peace and the like. The general rule is that he should speak only about acts of kindness, words of wisdom and the like.

He should not speak with a woman in the marketplace, even if she is his wife, sister or daughter.

This week we arrive at the final section of Law 7, in which the Rambam discusses the speech appropriate for the Torah scholar.

The Rambam begins by stating that the scholar must not lie. As I pointed out in the translation, the literal meaning of the Rambam's phrase is that the scholar not "change" his words. The meaning is not simply that he not outright lie. Such is clearly of universal application; the Rambam would not have instructed it specifically to the wise. Rather, the idea is that even in telling the truth, the scholar must be careful not to even slightly alter his words and misrepresent. As the Rambam continues, the Torah scholar must likewise not add to or detract from his words. Even if the overall story is "basically" true, the way the speaker embellishes it, the details he chooses to add, omit or emphasize, make all the difference in what the "truth" actually says.

It is curious that society today quite values a man's ability to doctor up the truth. Lawyers are paid top dollar for their ability to present the very same facts wholly in favor of one litigant. Marketers too are valued for their ability to advertise and package services or merchandise to their own company's advantage. And as we know all too well, the media, in its selection and presentation of facts and in its choice of words and images, can paint any picture of world events it chooses, coloring the minds of a gullible public based on its own biased opinions. Whether or not the facts themselves are accurate (in itself often dubious) actually plays a very small role in how "true" the actual information presented really is.

(I'm sure I need not belabor this, but if TV cameras show nothing but images of destroyed building in Gaza, of bloodied and maimed Palestinians, and of children crying over their fathers' coffins, of course Israel will become the ruthless, merciless aggressor, totally unjustified in its "disproportionate" use of "indiscriminate" force against a generally peaceful civilian population. The images do not have to be staged or doctored up (as they have been on several occasions). Yet choosing to present only a small part of an overall picture, no matter how accurate, is outright

falsehood. And as my teacher R. Yochanan Zweig explains, this is in fact the most sinister form of falsehood -- using truth itself, with all its credibility, for the purposes of deception.)

The Torah, however, does not at all value such an ability. Our forefather Jacob was praised by the Torah for being a "plain" man ("ish tahm" -- Genesis 25:27), which the commentator Rashi explains to mean one not versed in deceit, one who says what he means and means what he says. (For better or worse, for much of his life Jacob had to adopt those very abilities in order to hold his own against the likes of Laban and Esau.)

Further, in stark contrast to today, historically there was no such thing as lawyers in the traditional Jewish court system (leading one to wonder why so many are Jewish today...). Each side was simply to present its side of the story as accurately and objectively as possible. The Mishna (Pirkei Avos 1:8) specifically warns that no one should act as an "adviser" to either of the litigants -- assisting him in presenting his case most convincingly and effectively.

The Rambam continues that the exception to this rule is lying for the sake of peace and the like. The meaning is that if the interests of peace are best served by not saying the entire truth or by omitting a few uncomfortable details, this may override the overall ideal of truth. This is based upon Talmud Yevamos 65b that one is allowed to "change his words" for the sake of peace. I'll offer one of the Talmud's examples to illustrate.

When angels, disguised as travelers, visited Abraham and blessed Sarah that she would bear a child, Sarah laughed: "After I have withered I will have such youthfulness, and my husband is old?!" (Genesis 18:12). G-d immediately complained to Abraham: "Why did Sarah laugh so, saying 'Will I in fact give birth and I have become old?'" (v. 13). Sarah in fact laughed saying her husband is old, but G-d altered it so slightly to saying she is old. Thus, G-d Himself is at times guilty of touching up the facts for a good cause.

Further, Sarah's calling her 99-year-old husband "old" was hardly insulting (see Sefer Chofetz Chaim Hil' Rechilus 8:4 and note 6). Yet, G-d wanted to avoid even the slightest degree of friction between Abraham and Sarah. If the Jewish nation was to be conceived through them at that time, the love and harmony between them would have to be perfect.

The Talmud elsewhere (Bava Metziah 23b) offers other types of cases in which one is permitted to "change" his words -- no doubt alluded to here by the Rambam's added phrase "and the like." For example, if a Torah scholar is asked if he has mastered a certain tractate of the Talmud, he may feign ignorance. The meaning is that for the sake of humility he may decline to admit all his greatness. Another example is that if one had been a guest at the home of another, he may deny his host's graciousness so that the unscrupulous not take advantage of the host's hospitality.

And finally, Jewish law strictly forbids repeating to X what Y said behind his back if it will in no way further the cause of peace among men. And if X asks you, you are permitted -- nay, obligated -- to lie and withhold the information.

Thus, in spite of the Torah's great regard for truth and honesty, there are situations which override this ideal. For truth is not upheld for its own sake. Judaism certainly does not believe anything true must be known just because it's true. We do not subscribe to the American public's sacred "right to know" every juicy detail about the sins of the prominent. (Not solely for the sake of knowing it, that is. Of course if a person is actually unfit to lead, that is a very relevant matter.) Nor is any purpose served in telling your wife what you really think of her new dress or how the soup really came out.

Although lying is lying (besides that our wives usually know when we're doing so anyway), the Torah has a far greater ideal: peace. Most often, honesty is the surest way of ensuring peace. Being open and forthcoming with one's friend or spouse and candidly working out differences is far more satisfying and productive than being cagey and deceitful -- or letting anger and resentment build and fester. Yet oftentimes the ends of peace are achieved through withholding painful information rather than airing it. The Talmud states that G-d's "seal" is Truth (Shabbos 55a). Yet, writes the Talmud elsewhere, "Peace" is His name (Shabbos 10b, based on Judges 6:24). Only through both methods together, each applied in its proper measure, can the world truly become the reflection of G-d it must.

(Thoughts in part based on ideas heard from R. Yitzchak Berkovits of Aish HaTorah.)

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