ONE CANNOT MAKE BLANKET RULES CONCERNING TELLING THE TRUTH

by Rabbi Yissocher Frand

Parshas Toldos

One Cannot Make Blanket Rules Concerning Telling The Truth

These divrei Torah were adapted from the hashkafa portion of Rabbi Yissocher Frand's Commuter Chavrusah Tapes on the weekly portion: Tape #789, The Power of Your Own Words. Good Shabbos!

The story of Yaakov and Eisav and the "Blessings" in this week's parsha is one of the more difficult stories in Chumash. Yitzchak is about to give the blessings to Eisav. Rivkah feels that Yaakov is the son more deserving of the blessings, and she encourages Yaakov to disguise himself as Eisav. Yaakov listens to his mother and tricks his blind father into thinking that he is Eisav. Yaakov receives the blessings from Yitzchak. We know the rest of the story...

What is intriguing is a comment of the Gemara [Makkos 24a] in referring to Tehillim Chapter 15. This chapter, often read at funerals, lists the attributes of a person who may "dwell on G-d's Holy Mountain": One who walks in perfect innocence, and does what is right, and speaks the truth from his heart; who has no slander on his tongue, who has done his fellow no evil, etc., etc. The Gemara in Makkos takes each of these items and homiletically relates them to specific individuals. The expression "speaks the truth from his heart; who has no slander on his tongue" is identified with the patriarch Yaakov. The Gemara cites as proof the fact that Yaakov said "Maybe my father will touch me and I will be in his eyes like a liar." [Bereishis 27:12]

If we were told to pick a place in Chumash from which to prove that Yaakov was an honest person, this would not be our first choice. It would not even be our tenth choice! This is something which requires explanation: How did he do it? How did he say it?

If we had to cite a proof to the honesty of Yaakov, we would most likely pick the dialog he has with Lavan when he tells him he worked for him for 20 years and never cheated him once in all that time. "I put in an honest day's work. I worked in the night; I worked in the day; I worked in the heat; I worked in the cold." [Bereishis 31:37-42]

And yet, this incident, when he masqueraded as Eisav, is cited by the Gemara as the proof that

Yaakov was the man of truth, par excellence.

A second observation: Rivka instructs Yaakov that this is what he must do. She tells him she knows by Divine Inspiration that this is what he must do and accepts the spiritual responsibility for any negative consequences of his action.

Yaakov follows his mother's instructions and he enters his blind father's tent dressed in Eisav's clothing, identifying himself as "It is I, Eisav, your first born son." Rashi re-parses the statement as "It is I (here to serve you)! Eisav is your first born son." Technically, then, Yaakov was telling the truth when his words are "parsed correctly."

Why didn't Yaakov make a statement that was totally false, regardless of how the statement is parsed? He had Rivka's assurance that no harm would befall him. Why play the game of "It is I. Eisav is your first born."?

I once heard the following thought from Rav Kulefsky, , zt"l,(who served for many years as the premier maggid shiur in Ner Yisroel and subsequently became Rosh Hayehiva). We speak of "Give Truth (Emes) to Yaakov; Kindness (Chessed) to Avraham". It is no coincidence that the "tests" given respectively to both Yaakov and Avraham had to do precisely with the attribute in which they each excelled.

Avraham, the paradigm of Chessed is asked to slaughter his son. There could be nothing that is a greater anathema to the Man of Kindness than the command to slaughter his beloved son. The reason for this is that Avraham was called upon to purify his attribute of Chessed. It must not come from knee-jerk emotion or just because he is naturally a "nice guy". It has to be a Chessed that is purified and filtered until it is pure Chessed. The Almighty is teaching Avraham that there are times when it is necessary for him to go against that attribute, so that when he will exert it will be pure, unadulterated, pristine Chessed.

It is similar with Yaakov Avinu. Some people could be very honest simply because they have no cunning. They are poor liars and if they do say a lie, it is written all over their faces. Yaakov was not that type of person. The Torah does not say "Yaakov Tam" (Yaakov was simple), it says "Yaakov ish Tam" (he is a person that can apply his 'temimus'). But when the situation demanded, when he was dealing with a Lavan, he told Lavan "I am your match in trickery. You cannot pull a fast one on me. Mine is not knee-jerk 'Emes', it is 'Emes' that has been refined and filtered so that it is true 'Emes'". Sometimes the attribute of Truth requires its master to act in a way that is not 100% truthful. Some situations demand that even a master of Emes act in ways that appear not to be Emes.

Rivka assured Yaakov that for the good of Klal Yisrael, he must do this. He needed to sublimate his attribute of truth and act in the appropriate manner. He listened to her. Therefore, he became a bigger master of truth. But she did not give him a carte blanche to depart from the attribute of truth. So when he didn't have to lie he did not lie. If possible, he would not tell a "black lie" but would limit it to a "white lie," by saying something like "It is I. Eisav is your first born."

This is why the Talmud marshals from THIS incident that Yaakov was the embodiment of someone who did not have falsehood on his lips. He is the true man of truth because he knows when to say 'Emes' and how to say 'Emes' and when one must say something that is not 100% 'Emes'.

I saw an amazing insight in the work "Heima Yenachamuni" by the Tolner Rebbe of Jerusalem. The above-cited Gemara explains that the expression in Tehillim "who speaks truth in his heart" (dover Emes b'levov) refers to Rav Safra. Chazal describe the extent to which Rav Safra was a man of truth. Rav Safra was in the middle of Shmoneh Esrei and he had a precious stone in front of him. A non-Jew approached him while he was davening and said "That is a beautiful stone. I will pay you $1000 for it." Rav Safra did not respond. The Gentile assumed he was playing tough to get and raised his offer to $1500. Still, Rav Safra was silent. $2000? $5000? $10,000! Finally, Rav Safra concluded Shmoneh Esrei, turned to the non-Jew and said "It is yours for $1,000 - your original offer." Since mentally he had accepted the original offer when he first heard it, "in his heart" he had already committed to the sale at that price and he kept the words he spoke in his heart (dover emes b'lvovo).

The Gemara in Chulin relates that Mar Zutra was going from Sichra to Mechoza. Rava and Rav Safra were headed at the same time from Mechoza to Sichra. When they met near the outskirts of Mechoza, Mar Zutra mistakenly believed that Rava and Rav Safra had come out to greet him. Rav Safra corrected him immediately and told him that they had not come out to greet him but rather they were on the road out of town anyway. Rava asked Rav Safra, "Why did you do that. Why did you have to make him feel bad? Let him live with his mistake. Why did you have to pop his balloon?"

The Tolner Rebbe explains: This is the same Rav Safra from the Gemara in Makkos who excelled in 'Emes'. He was following his own opinion that one needs to be 100% truthful - even to the extent of "dover emes b'lvovo". Rava corrected him and said: "Rav Safra, there are times when one should not always tell the truth. Sometimes, it is better to be quiet." True, Mar Zutra would have thought something that was false. But that is not tragic. It would have been his own mistake. Rava was teaching Rav Safra that there are two parts to the pasuk in Tehillim. There is "dover emes b'lvovo" (he speaks truth in his heart) but there is also "Lo asah l're-ayhu ra-ah" (not cause you fellow man evil). One must know when to say the truth and when to be quiet. It is not always necessary to say the truth. One is not allowed to deceive a person, but if the person is deceiving himself and there is no harm done by that, it is not always a mitzvah to "correct his error."

This is really what the Gemara says in Moed Katan [5a] as well. The Gemara expounds a pasuk in Tehillim [50:23]: "He who offers confession honors Me; and one who orders [his] way (v'sam derech] I will show him the salvation of G-d." The Talmud makes a play on the words v'sam derech (and orders his way) and reads "v'sham derech", meaning and he evaluates the situation. The person who truly wants to be a Jew of integrity cannot always go blindly even in following correct attributes. One cannot make blanket rules: It is not always appropriate to perform the Chessed. Sometimes the mitzvah is not to do the Chessed. And it is not always appropriate to speak every cold hard truth. One must evaluate (v'sham) and figure out when and how each (even) positive attribute is to be

applied.

If you liked my lecture tonight, that is good. If you did not like the lecture do not come over and tell me "It wasn't a good lecture". Sometimes it is better not to say anything than to tell the truth, if it is going to hurt. One needs to Sham Orchosav, evaluate his ways and use common sense. One need always ask himself "What does G-d want me to do in this situation?"

Sometimes, even from the paradigm of truth (Yaakov Avinu) there is a demand not to go with a 100% accurate statement. This was Rava's response to Rav Safra. It can be a lesson to all of us.

This write-up was adapted from the hashkafa portion of Rabbi Yissocher Frand's Commuter Chavrusah Torah Tape series on the weekly Torah portion. The complete list of halachic topics covered in this series for Parshas Toldos Sarah are provided below:

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