

# IS IT EVER PERMITTED TO LIE?

*by Rabbi Doniel Neustadt*

*A discussion of Halachic topics related to the Parsha of the week. For final rulings, consult your Rav.*

Yaakov Avinu was the amud ha-emes, the Pillar of Truth. Indeed, according to the Talmud<sup>(1)</sup>, the greatest fear that Yaakov Avinu had was that he might encounter life situations where he would be forced to lie. When Rivkah commanded Yaakov to falsely present himself to his blind father as Eisav, he protested, for our Sages<sup>(2)</sup> compare lying to idol worship. It was only when Rivkah told him that it was the will of Heaven that he be the one to receive the blessings from his father Yitzchak, that Yaakov relented and allowed his mother to disguise him to appear as Eisav.

What is the definition of lying? Rabbeinu Yonah<sup>(3)</sup> lists nine different categories of lies. In order of severity, they are:

- People who cheat in business, causing others financial loss;
- People who exploit others after gaining their trust through deception;
- People whose lies cause others to lose out on some gain or benefit that was coming to them;
- People who fabricate stories merely for the sake of lying;
- People who hold out the promise of giving another person material goods while never intending to follow up on their promise;
- People who intend to keep a promise but do not honor their commitment;
- People who claim that they did a favor or a good deed for another when in fact they have not;
- People who praise themselves for virtues that they do not possess;
- People who change minor details when retelling an episode.

A careful analysis of these nine categories shows that all of the lies are told either for the purpose of cheating another person, or for self-glorification, etc. R' Yonah, however, does not list those who lie for a "good" purpose or for a "good" reason. Thus, we may ask, is it ever permitted to lie?

Throughout Talmudic literature, we find stories about our Sages veering from the truth for "good" reasons<sup>(4)</sup>. Obviously, however, only the poskim can draw practical conclusions from such cases, since these very episodes can be understood on various levels. Moreover, not everything quoted in the Talmud is applied in practical Halachah, as we often rule differently from an opinion stated in the

Talmud. The following, however, are some real-life situations with which the poskim deal:

If one is asked information about a matter that is supposed to remain secret, he may answer, "I don't know"(5). Similarly, although one is not allowed to lie in order to avoid telling bad news(6), it is permitted to say, "I don't know"(7).

During an appeal for funds, one is not allowed to announce a donation in an amount greater than he is planning to give, even if the aim is to spur others to commit themselves to larger donations(8).

A wealthy man is permitted to lie about his wealth if he fears "the evil eye" (ayin ha-ra) or if he does not want to arouse jealousy(9). When collecting funds for a poor Torah scholar, one may say that he is collecting for hachnasas kallah, marrying off a bride, if he thinks that people will be more receptive to that cause(10). It is also permitted to raise funds for hachnasas kallah even when the collection is primarily for the benefit of the groom(11).

It is prohibited to lie for the sake of financial gain, even when no stealing is involved(12).

If one fears that a package will be mishandled, it is permitted to write "glass" on it, even though it does not contain any glass(13). If one sees that his wife will be late for Shabbos, he is permitted to tell her that the hour is later than it really is. This is permitted only when it is clear that she is procrastinating. If, however, she is rushing and harried and telling her that the hour is later than it really is will only pressure her further, it is forbidden to do so(14).

If, by refusing to receive a visitor, the visitor's feelings will be hurt, one is permitted to leave instructions saying that he is not home(15). One should not, however, instruct a minor to lie about his parents' whereabouts, since that teaches the child to lie.

#### **FOOTNOTES:**

**1** Makkos 24a.

**2** Sanhedrin 92a.

**3** Sha'arei Teshuvah 3:178-186.

**4** See, for example, Berachos (43b) - episode with R' Papa; Pesachim (112a) -attributing a statement to a fabricated source so that it will be readily accepted; Sukkah (34b) - quoting Shemuel's threat to the haddasim merchants; Yevamos (65b) - lying for the sake of peace; Bava Metzia (23b) - departing from the truth for the sake of humility, modesty or discretion; Bava Metzia (30a) -episode with R' Yishmael. There are many other such examples.

**5** Harav S.Z. Auerbach and Harav S.Y. Elyashiv quoted in Titen Emes l'Yaakov, pg. 76.

**6** Y.D. 402:12.

**7** Harav S.Z. Auerbach, Harav S.Y. Elyashiv and Harav Y.Y. Fisher quoted in Titen Emes l'Yaakov pg.

89. See also Metzudos David, II Shemuel 18:29.

**8** Minchas Yitzchak 3:97, based on Maharsha, Sukkah 29a.

**9** Harav S.Y. Elyashiv quoted in Titen Emes l'Yaakov, pg. 78.

**10** Teshuvos Mishneh Sachir (end of vol. 1) quoting a story with the Chasam Sofer. Part of the ruling is based on the Midrash Rabbah (Ki-Sisa) that compares a talmid chacham to a kallah. In that story the Chasam Sofer allowed a tzedakah fund intended for hachnasas kallah to support a well-known talmid chacham.

**11** Harav S.Z. Auerbach quoted in Titen Emes l'Yaakov, pg. 55.

**12** R' Yonah (Sha'arei Teshuvah 180,186); Rashas"h (Shabbos 140b) and Sdei Chemed (vol. 4, pg. 87) opposing the Maharsha (Shabbos 140) who implies that it is permissible; Chafetz Chayim (Sefas Tamim 2).

**13** Harav S.Y. Elyashiv, Harav Y.Y. Fisher and Harav C. Kanievsky, quoted in Titen Emes l'Yaakov, pg. 66.

**14** Harav S.Y. Elyashiv quoted in Titen Emes l'Yaakov, pg. 86.

**15** Harav S.Z. Auerbach and Harav S.Y. Elyashiv quoted in Titen Emes L'yaakov, pg. 76. See also Machatzis ha-Shekel O.C. 156 which states that if one has no time to answer a question about a particular subject, he may say that he is not learning that subject now and cannot answer the question.

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