



Lying for the sake of Peace

Are white lies permissible? When is a person permitted to veer from the truth?

The Runaway Husband

Good Shabbos!

One night in Israel, a rabbi was woken up by his wife at three o'clock in the morning. She had heard the sound of sobs coming from the stairwell in the apartment building, so she wakes him up and says that she hears someone crying outside their front door. He tells her, "Quick! Open it up right away!"

She opens the door, and in walks a young woman who had only gotten married a few days before. She was actually still in her "Sheva Brachos," the seven days right after the wedding.

The rabbi asks her, "Where's your husband?"

Between sobs, she says, "He ran away!"

This unfortunate young woman was the product of a single-parent home. She had been raised by her mother. She had lived in a religious neighborhood her entire life. When she got to marriageable age, a yeshivah student was suggested to her, and indeed, everything proceeded nicely. The young man asked her about her father, and she told him that he lived abroad and had never been part of her life. She had actually never met him at all.

And so, before long, the two were married.

But last night, some good soul came along and told the young groom a “secret”— that his new wife’s father was an Arab. Just like that.

When the new husband heard this “news,” he got very angry—but above all, he felt deceived. He was angry at his wife for not telling him the truth. He came home, packed his belongings and left the house.

And now, she stood crying in front of the rabbi.

The rabbi asked the young wife where she thought her husband would be right now. She provided several possible addresses: By his parents, by some friends, and so on.

The rabbi woke up one of his go-getters, a hustler who knew how to shake things up. He told him to try to find this husband—we cannot afford that even one night should pass when he isn’t with his bride. “Do everything to find him,” the rabbi said.

This guy threw in quite a bit of effort, and within an hour-and-a-half, the young groom found himself sitting in the rabbi’s house.

He says to the rabbi: “She lied to me about something so important! How can I build a life with her based on honesty when she lied to me right at the start of our marriage?!”

The rabbi told him that she was actually allowed to do so.

Over 1,700 years ago, a Talmudic scholar lived in Iraq. His name was Rabbah. He was the Rosh Yeshivah, the dean, of the largest yeshivah in Babylon. He had thousands of students.

The Talmud (Tractate Yevamos 45) tells us that he was once approached by a young man who was the son of a Jewish mother and a non-Jewish father, who was experiencing difficulty in finding a

match. No one wanted to marry him.

Rabbah told him, “Exile yourself. Go out to a place where no one knows who you are, and there you will be given a suitable daughter of Israel.”

And so, the present-day rabbi told this disgruntled husband, the fact that she lied to you about this aspect of her background doesn’t make her a liar.

After a lot of convincing, the young man agreed to return to his bride.

When We Veer From the Truth

In this week’s Torah portion, we learn, among other things, about the laws of weights and measures.

In the old days, scales were obviously not electronic. Rather, the scales could handle at most a few pounds. And what you’d do is put the item to be weighed on one side and a small weight on the other side—and when the scale balanced itself out in the middle, you would know that the item weighed the same as the weights on the other side.

But the Torah tells us in our portion that not only is it forbidden to lie and steal when it comes to weights and measures (as if we didn’t know that!), it also tells us that “You shall not keep in your house two different ephah measures, one large and one small” (Devarim 25:14).

This means that you are not allowed to have weights in the house that are not precise. Why? If you have them in the house, it’s likely that someone may not know or realize that they are “off” and accidentally use them. To remove this stumbling block, it is forbidden for a person to own even something that could lead to fraud.

Not only that, but the Torah tells us, “Distance yourself from a false

matter” (Shmos 23:7). It is not only forbidden to lie but you need to distance yourself from all false matters.

So how could Rabbah here have told that young man that he should go to a city where no one knew him and not tell anyone that he was the son of a non-Jewish father?!

The answer is: It’s true that the Torah constantly obligates a person to always tell the truth—but, as is the case with every rule, there is an exception to the rule. There are cases in which it is permitted to veer from the truth.

The Talmud (Tractate Bava Metzia 23b) says that one is permitted to deviate from speaking the truth when it comes to three things.

The first is: “With a tractate,” meaning that if someone is asked whether he or she has studied a particular subject and he indeed has and knows it well, still, if he does not want to boast about it, he has permission to say, “I don’t know it well.”

The second thing the Sages permitted deviating from the truth is with “Puraya.” Normally, Puraya is Aramaic for the holiday of Purim. But here, it is a euphemism for intimate and private matters. In such matters, it’s better to not discuss them with others. (Similarly, it’s permitted to hide one’s pregnancy at the start.)

And the third is with “ushpiza,” which is a reference to hospitality and having guests. For example, if someone asks you whether you were invited to a party and you know that if you say yes, the other person will get angry or jealous—or try to force the host to invite him too—you’re allowed to veer from the truth.

The Mitzvah to Lie

But after these three is a more serious level, in which it is not only permitted to deviate from the truth but is a mitzvah to deviate from

the truth—and this is when it comes to fostering peace between two friends or between a man and his wife. Then, not only are you allowed to tell a lie, but it's a mitzvah to lie.

The Midrash tells us about Aharon HaKohen, Aaron the High Priest, who was busy his whole life making peace.

When he would hear about a couple fighting, he would come along and tell the wife, "Your husband is very sorry that he insulted you; he loves you very much." Aaron would then go to the husband and tell him that his wife loves him very much and regretted what she had done to him.

That's how Aharon HaKohein would reunite families—to the point that when these families would have baby boys, they would name them Aaron after him.

But how do we know that for the subject of peace, it is permitted to deviate from the truth? We learn it from G-d Himself.

The Torah itself (Bereishis 18:12) tells us that when Sarah was given the news that she was destined to give birth to a son, the verse states, "And Sarah laughed within herself, saying, 'After I have become worn out, will I have smooth flesh? And also, my master is old.'"

G-d did not like that Sarah poked fun at this bit of news. He turned to Abraham and said, "Why did Sarah laugh, saying, 'Is it really true that I will give birth, although I am old?' "

And Rashi comments, "[G-d] changed the verse for the sake of peace."

After all, if you look at the original verse carefully, Sarah did not say, "I am old" — she said, "My master is old."

But for the sake of peace, G-d deviated from the truth so that

Abraham would not be insulted by the fact that his wife considered him old for being 99.

Thus, we have a mitzvah to deviate from the truth for the sake of peace.

But why indeed can we do so? What happened to the mitzvah of speaking the truth?

You know, many times when two Torah commandments “collide” with each other, one pushes aside the other. When the mitzvah of truth collides with the mitzvah of peace, the mitzvah of truth is pushed aside for the value of peace—because in the Torah, peace is the value that is more important.

As Maimonides writes at the end of the laws of Chanukah, “Great is peace, for the entire Torah was given to make peace in the world”—and, as the Rebbe adds, the purpose and intent of every one of the Torah’s mitzvos is to bring peace into the world.