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## Lying for the Sake of *Shalom*

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*Under what circumstances may one lie for the sake of peace?*

*How far must one go to avoid lying in such scenarios?*

The Torah instructs (Shemos 23:7), “*Midvar sheker tirchak*,” “Distance yourself from a false matter.” There is considerable debate among the halachic authorities whether there is actually a mitzvah for a regular individual to avoid lying, or if the mitzvah is limited to judges in a *bais din* (see *Maseches Kusim* from Rabbi Chaim Kanievski fn. 30 and *Sefer Emes Kinei* 1 fn. 2). Even if it is not technically a Torah-level mitzvah, it is clear that lying is generally frowned upon by the Torah and strictly forbidden on a Rabbinic level (*Sefer Emes Kinei* *ibid.*).

However, there are situations where it is permitted to lie for *toeles* (a constructive purpose) (see *Shu”t Torah Lishma* 364 for an extensive listing of such scenarios). One of the most common situations where one may utter a falsehood – and may even be obligated to do so – is for the sake of *shalom* (peace)<sup>1</sup>. This article will focus on the details of this halacha.

**The source:** The Gemara (*Yevamos* 65b) cites Rabi Ila in the name of Rabi Shimon ben Elazar who says that it is permitted for a person to bend the truth for the sake of peace. The Gemara cites a number of cases from the Torah and the Prophets where great people, and even Hashem Himself, bent the truth or even made something up to maintain peace:

When Sara expressed astonishment that she would bear a child at her advanced age, she said, “And my husband is old.” Hashem, when relating this to her husband Avraham, told him that she said, “And I (Sara) am old,” so that Avraham would not be insulted by his wife’s words about him.

After Yaakov’s death, the Tribes were concerned that Yosef, now viceroy of Egypt, would seek to take revenge for their having sold him as a slave decades earlier. They therefore sent an emissary to Yosef to tell him that Yaakov, before passing, had left instructions for Yosef to overlook his brothers’ misdeeds. This was a fabrication, as Yaakov had never said anything of the sort. Still, to maintain peace, the brothers were permitted to invent the story.

Hashem instructed the prophet Shmuel to anoint Dovid as the king of the Jewish People. Shmuel expressed apprehension that King Shaul would certainly be enraged upon hearing that Shmuel had done this. Hashem instructed Shmuel to travel to Dovid with a calf and claim he was visiting to bring an offering, thus mitigating any suspicion his visit might create. Here, again, Hashem instructs Shmuel to invent a story to maintain peace.

One may lie not only to maintain peace, but also to create peace. The Talmud (*Sanhedrin* 6a) teaches that Aharon HaKohein loved peace and would pursue peace. The Talmud relates that when Aharon saw two people in a fight, he would privately approach each one and tell him that the other person was feeling very bad about their dispute and wished to patch things up, but was

ashamed to approach his disputant directly. When the two would later meet, they would embrace and make up, thanks to Aharon’s efforts. Aharon was allowed to invent these facts to create peace between people.

Elsewhere, the Talmud broadens the allowance of lying for the sake of peace to a scenario where telling the truth will cause a person anguish. The Talmud (*Kesubos* 17a) cites the opinion of Bais Hillel that one should praise the fine qualities of a bride before her groom even though she does not actually possess such qualities. Similarly, say Bais Hillel, if someone purchased something and is wondering if he got a good deal, one should lie and tell him that he did get a good deal even though this is not true, rather than telling the person the truth and causing him anguish.

**Practical application:** The above scenario is quite common. There are people who claim that they “say it like it is.” This is not necessarily a virtue, as the Talmud clearly teaches that one should bend the truth or even lie to avoid causing another person anguish. For example, if someone just purchased a new outfit and asks, “How do I look?” it is often proper to respond with positive words even if they are exaggerated or outright not true.

It is important to note that if there is a constructive purpose in telling the person the truth, one must inform the person. This is based upon the Torah prohibition, “You shall not stand by your brother’s blood” (*Vayikra* 19:16). The Gemara (*Sanhedrin* 73a) explains that if one can save his fellow from death or injury, this mitzvah obligates him to do so. The Chofetz Chaim (*Sefer Chofetz Chaim, Hilchos Rechilus, Be’er Mayim Chayim* 9:1), based upon the Sifra, explains that this mitzvah applies to saving someone else from financial loss, as well. From other scenarios where the Chofetz Chaim allows one to share negative information for a constructive purpose, such as avoiding marrying someone with undisclosed serious medical issues or heretical views, it seems he extends this mitzvah to saving another from emotional or spiritual damage, as well.

To return to the three scenarios discussed above: If a person is looking into a potential match for marriage, and the candidate has certain defects or issues, one may be required to inform the interested party of these facts. However, one must seek the guidance of a competent halachic authority, as often, the question of whether to say something or not is very complex, and taking the wrong course of action, one way or the other, can have devastating consequences.

If someone purchased an item but did not get a good deal, and he has the opportunity to return it or negotiate a more reasonable transaction, one should inform the buyer of the problem with the item so that he can return it.

If a person asks, “How do I look?” and one can provide some advice to improve the person’s appearance, it may be appropriate to do so, assuming

<sup>1</sup> There are a number of approaches to explain why such a lie is permissible. See *Sefer Emes Kinei* 4 fn.1 for an extensive discussion from numerous sources.

the questioner is indeed interested in such feedback and will not be offended.

**Limitations:** The Ritva (Kesubos 16b s.v. *kaitzad*) comments, “Whatever is for the ways of peace – there is no [prohibition of] *midvar sheker tirchak*.” This statement sounds like a *carte blanche heter* (allowance) to lie whenever peace is at stake.

However, other sources limit this *heter*. The Gemara (Yevamos 63a) relates that Rav’s wife was a difficult person, and she would do the opposite of what he requested. If he would ask for lentils to eat, says the Talmud, she would make him beans; if he asked for beans, she’d make lentils. When Rav’s son Chiya grew older, he conveyed his father’s wishes to his mother, and, lo and behold, she actually made what Rav had requested! Rav commented to his son, “Your mother has improved,” whereupon Chiya told his father that, in fact, he had told his mother the opposite of what his father had requested, leading her to prepare what Rav actually wanted. Rav told Chiya that this was not a proper thing to do, citing the verse (Jeremiah 9:4), “They have trained their tongues to speak falsehood.”

Seemingly, Chiya did nothing wrong, as he was attempting to foster peace between his parents. However, the Meiri, commenting on this passage, states that while one may lie to prevent a destructive dispute from occurring, it is preferable that one deal with a personal less-than-ideal situation rather than lie. This was why Rav objected to Chiya’s clever approach, as he preferred to not get the food he wanted rather than lie to his wife. It emerges that while one may bend the truth, this is only true when it is necessary.

However, Shu”t Torah Lishma (364), before citing the aforementioned Meiri, points out that Rav did not forbid his son Chiya from engaging in such deception due to *midvar sheker tirchak*, since his intent was to promote peace, but rather advised him not to do so to avoid becoming accustomed to lying.

The implication of the Torah Lishma is that there is not always a clear-cut ruling regarding whether one may lie where other options that would produce less-than-ideal results are available. Thus, lying to avoid a difficult situation if peace can still be maintained without lying, albeit under challenging circumstances, may not be permitted, or may be permitted but not preferred, or may be permitted or even preferred; everything depends upon the factors of the particular scenario. Every situation is unique, and if one is unsure, competent Rabbinic guidance should be sought.

In addition, even where it is permitted to lie, one must seek to minimize the falsehood. The Chofetz Chaim (Sefer Chofetz Chaim Hilchos Rechilus 1:8) states that while one may, if necessary, lie to avoid sharing *rechilus* (telling one person what someone else said or did if this will cause the listener to be upset with the person being spoken about), this is only if he cannot come up with a way to avoid the *rechilus* without lying. Rabbi Chaim Kanievski (Maseches Kusim fn. 30) learns this idea from when Yaakov took the blessings by impersonating his brother Eisav. Yaakov was simply taking what was rightfully his, as he had purchased the right of the firstborn, and he was certainly permitted to behave in a clever fashion to secure the blessings. Nonetheless, his statements and responses to his father Yitzchak were fashioned in a way that minimized the falsehood. For example, Yaakov said “*ani Eisav bechorecha*,” which, understood simply, means, “I am Eisav your firstborn.” However, it can also be interpreted to mean, “I am [the one bringing you this food]. Eisav is your firstborn.” (See Rashi Bereishis 27:19,24 for this and other examples of Yaakov’s carefully chosen words.) In fact, the Aruch Laner (Yevamos 65b s.v. *ko*) says that it is only permitted to lie for the

sake of peace when the words one says can also be understood in a truthful fashion, even though that is not the simple meaning of the statement. The Chasam Sofer (Responso 6:59) cites the Ramban (Bereishis 18:13) who understands that Hashem did not tell an untruth to Avraham regarding Sarah’s words; rather, He only told him the non-offensive portion, as Sarah had in fact said that both she and her husband were old. The Chasam Sofer infers from this that lying outright is not a simple matter. However, the practical halacha allows lying outright when absolutely necessary.

Another limitation is where harm will be caused to another due to the lie. Rabbeinu Yonah in Sefer Sha’arei Teshuva (3:373) discusses different categories of liars. One category is those whose lies do not harm anyone. It is in this category that Rabbeinu Yonah discusses the *heter* of lying for a constructive purpose such as to maintain peace. This indicates that Rabbeinu Yonah permits lying for a constructive purpose only if no harm will be caused to another through the lie. One may not, however, utter a falsehood with for the sake of peace if this will cause harm to another.

May one lie on a constant basis for the sake of peace? The Yam Shel Shlomo (Yevamos 6:46) seems to say that one may lie only on an occasional, happenstance basis. He cites Rav’s rebuke to his son Rav Chiya, discussed above, as the basis for this ruling, for Rav objected to his son’s lying to his mother, explaining that this is “training the tongue to speak falsehood.” Sefer Emes Kinei (5 fn. 2) finds this ruling difficult, since the Gemara endorses Aharon’s approach toward making peace between others by telling each party of the dispute that the other party wished to patch things up. It seems that this was Aharon’s constant *modus operandi*, one that he utilized constantly, yet he is praised for it. Sefer Emes Kinei concludes that the matter needs further study.

A closer examination of the Yam Shel Shlomo’s words, however, indicates that he is not coming to forbid constant lying but, rather, lying in a situation where one was specifically appointed to convey information between two parties, such as in the case of Rav Chiya, who was tasked by his father with conveying his wishes to his mother. Lying in such a case is more egregious than lying when casually sharing information or responding to a random question, and is thus training oneself to lie.

The Sefer Chasidim (426 [1431 in some editions]) states that one may lie for the sake of peace only regarding what has already happened, but not regarding the future. Shu”t Torah Lishma (*ibid.*) disagrees, however, and wonders why there should be a distinction. He further notes that other Rishonim seem to disagree with this ruling. The Magen Avraham (end of 156), though, quotes the Sefer Chasidim as halacha, and the Magen Avraham’s words are cited approvingly by the Chasam Sofer (*ibid.*). It appears, however, that this stringency is not observed.

Sefer Emes Kinei (5:9) states that it is *mistaver me’od* (very logical) to say that minors, who will not appreciate the nuances of when it is permitted to bend the truth, should not utilize this *heter*. It seems to this author that there are situations where a child of some maturity can appreciate the need to bend the truth in a diplomatic fashion at times, and a parent or adult in a similar position must judge the best course of action for the child based on his assessment of the child’s intelligence and maturity.

In conclusion, bending the truth or lying outright for the sake of peace certainly has a time and place. However, lying is a terrible trait, and one must engage in it carefully. Careful thought must be given as to when and how this *heter* may be utilized.

## Points to Ponder

***May one lie to prevent serious harm even though minor harm will occur to another due to the lie?***

***May one lie to a child to avoid a temper tantrum?***

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*Please consult with a qualified halachic authority for all practical questions of halacha*

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