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**TALMUDIC AGGADA**

**By Rav Yitzchak Blau**

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Dedicated in memory of our parents Jack Stone z"l and Helen and Benjamin Pearlman z"l and in honor of Esther Stone by Gary and Ilene Stone

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**Shiur #10: Lying for the Sake of Peace**

R. Ila’e said in the name of R. Elazar the son of Shimon: “It is permissible to lie for the sake of peace, as it says: ‘Your father commanded before he died, saying: So shall ye say unto Joseph: Forgive, I pray you now, the transgression of your brothers, and their sin…’ (*Bereishit* 50:16).” R. Natan said: “It is a *mitzva*, as it says: ‘And Shmuel said: How can I go? When Shaul hears, he will kill me’ (*Shmuel I* 16:2).” It was taught in the house of R. Yishmael: “Peace is so great that even God lies for its sake. Initially, it says: ‘And my husband is old’ (*Bereishit* 18:12). Later it says: ‘And I am old’ (*Bereishit* 18:13).” (*Yevamot* 65b)

The Gemara’s three proofs work in ascending order. In the first proof, Yosef’s brothers fabricate an account of their father Yaakov’s deathbed advice in order to encourage harmonious relations with their brother. This verse indicates the permissibility of lying for peace. In the second proof, God instructs Shmuel to tell Shaul that he is traveling in order to offer a sacrifice (not to anoint David as the new monarch) so that Shmuel will avoid Shaul’s wrath. Since this directive comes from God, R. Natan derives that such behavior constitutes a *mitzva*. Finally, God Himself engages in this practice. Sara was incredulous that her elderly husband Avraham could father a child, but God tells Avraham that Sarah expressed doubt about her own ability to conceive children. The Divine strategy prevents Avraham from taking offense that his wife deems him too old.

Each of the three proofs is problematic and demands further analysis. How does the Gemara know that Yaakov did not in fact instruct Yosef to forgive his brothers? One *midrash* argues that we know Yaakov did not give this instruction, because the Torah never records Yaakov saying so (*Bereishit Rabba* 100:8). However, this argument from omission does not seem sufficiently strong to establish lying as permissible. Several Torah stories leave out details that are filled in later. Only after the brothers are in Egypt do we discover that Yosef cried out from the pit, and that Reuven told the brothers not to harm Yosef (*Bereishit* 42: 21-22). Similarly, we only know that sending spies was the people of Israel’s initiative from the account in *Devarim* 1:22, but not from the original account of the story in *Bemidbar* 13. So too, this final message from Yaakov may have been omitted earlier and filled in only in the brother’s account after the fact.

Two other factors support the Gemara’s assumption that Yaakov never gave this instruction. Rashi (*Bereishit* 50:16) explains that Yaakov did not suspect Yosef of vengeful feelings. Throughout the biblical account, Yaakov has an extremely high opinion of Yosef; therefore, Yaakov would not worry that his beloved son would want to punish his brothers, and he would never feel a need to send such a message. Maharsha adds that the previous verse in *Bereishit* also supports this reading. “And when Joseph's brethren saw that their father was dead, they said: 'It may be that Joseph will hate us, and will fully requite us all the evil which we did to him” (*Bereishit* 50:15). The placement of this verse immediately prior to the brothers approaching Yosef provides a context and a motivation for their conversation with him. Fear of reprisal inspired them to play loose with the truth.

The second proof assumes that Shmuel prevaricated when speaking to Shaul. However, the prophet did bring an offering, so weren’t his words technically true? Meiri explains that Shmuel’s true reason for going was to anoint David, and saying that the purpose of the trip was otherwise constitutes a falsehood, even if he does bring an offering along the way. I believe Meiri’s point of crucial significance. Some rely on rabbinic sources to suggest that as long as a person says what is technically true, it does not matter if the words mislead the listener. For example, one *midrash* parses Yaakov’s reply to his blind father in such a way that he did not speak an untruth. “I am…but Esav is your first born” (*Bereishit Rabba* 65:18). This approach attempts to protect Yaakov from criticism, while potentially sending a dangerous message that deceiving another is fine, as long as you avoid any literally false words. Meiri’s reading removes that possible conclusion. Though Shmuel did offer a sacrifice, only the pursuit of peace can justify misleading Shaul.

Other *midrashim* refer to Yaakov’s statement to his father as a lie (see *Tanchuma Vayetza* 11 and *Balak* 18). Even the *midrash* that creatively reads his statement as a truth may be arguing that lying has two components: uttering falsehood and misleading others. The rereading only exempts Yaakov from the first aspect of fabrication, but not the second. Meiri clarifies that the second aspect of fabrication, misleading others, suffices to forbid certain speech unless that speech is motivated by the pursuit of peace.

Several *acharonim* (later rabbinic authorities) wonder how God’s instruction to Shmuel proves that lying is allowed for the sake of peace; after all, the prophet’s life was in danger. Since we permit almost any halakhic violation to preserve life, Shmuel’s lie does not indicate a special leniency in the case of pursuing peace; there must be a life threatening situation. R. Yaakov Ettlinger (*Arukh La-ner*) suggests that, as a messenger of God, Shmuel had a guarantee that he would suffer no harm. Therefore, the Gemara can establish that peace overrides truth even when there is no potential loss of life, because Shmuel’s life is not really in danger here. This answer is quite difficult since the Gemara (*Pesachim* 8b) clearly states that the principle, “messengers for performing a *mitzva* will not be harmed,” does not apply to a dangerous scenario. In fact, that *gemara* proves the principle from Shmuel’s concern in this very story. R. Ettlinger’s responds that our *gemara* in *Yevamot* reflects a different Talmudic opinion that expands the scope of the principle, “messengers for performing a *mitzva* will not be harmed,” to include even dangerous circumstances. This solution seems forced.

The third proof may not even involve a lie. Sarah says: “After I have withered, will I become gentle again, and my husband is old” (*Bereishit* 18:12). She does not believe that she can still bear a child on account of both her own and her husband’s advanced years. If so, God does not prevaricate when he records her as focusing on her own age; He merely relates only part of what Sara said. How does this omission indicate that we can lie to avoid hurting another’s feelings? Ritva contends that the first part of Sara’s statement is not a rhetorical question; rather, it refers to a past event in her life. According to one *aggada* (rabbinic story, on *Bava Metzia* 87a), Sarah resumed having her period on that very day, after a time during which she no longer menstruated. According to this reading, Sara says: “After I withered, I have turned gentle again, but my husband is old.” Only Avraham’s age prevents them from having a child.

Ritva tries to bring support for his interpretation from Sara using the past tense: “*acharei baloti hayta li edna.*” However, as other commentators note, biblical Hebrew sometimes uses past tense to mean future, and the simpler reading is that Sara is incredulous about the possibility of turning young again. Indeed, the immediately preceding verse (18:11) states explicitly that Sara had stopped having her period.

Meiri offers a different approach in which God has a higher standard of truth. For people, retelling some of a quote would not constitute a falsehood; but for God, it does. Therefore, God’s statement to Avraham still indicates the value of departing from the truth to not hurt another’s feelings.

Maharsha suggests that accuracy in reporting relates to formulation as well as content. Sara said “*va’adoni zaken*” about Avraham and used a different formulation to describe her own advanced age. God transformed her statement about herself into “*va’ani zakanti.*” Even if she did say something about her own age, the change in language represents a deviation from the truth. Not only what is said matters, but how it is said.

Though all three proofs have difficulties, the Gemara’s underlying principle remains firm. We greatly value truth, but do not consider it an absolute value overcoming all other considerations. Preserving family harmony and preventing hurt feelings sometimes demand deviating from the truth.