

IS IT EVER OK TO LIE?

ISSUE #3
JANUARY 2011
TEVET 5771

We invite parents to first read "Is it Ever Normal to Lie? A Parent's Guide" on page four.

Fourteen-year-old Zack Nash had just won a golf tournament when he realized that a friend of his had left a golf club in Zack's golf bag. According to golf rules, a player is only allowed to carry fourteen clubs in his bag and with his friend's extra club, he was carrying fifteen the entire tournament. This rule applies even though Zack didn't use the extra club and it meant that Zack's entire game was invalid. Zack could have easily ignored the infraction and justified it in his mind because it played no role in his game. But Zack decided that this was not the right thing to do and Zack called the director of the tournament to let him know that he was disqualifying himself from the tournament and was sending back the medal. (Source: [Milwaukee Wisconsin Journal Sentinel](#))

We have all been in situations where telling a lie or ignoring the truth would have been an easy way out of a difficult situation. As honest people, telling the truth is very important to us. However, sometimes, telling the truth to someone else can hurt them or us. In this discussion, we will explore a number of scenarios where telling the truth might be hurtful or embarrassing:

CASE ONE	Leah and Adina just finished their piano recital in front of two hundred people. During Leah's recital, she made a mistake. After the recital, she asked Adina "When I made that mistake, was everyone laughing?" What should Adina say?
CASE TWO	Rachel lives on a block where her neighbors love to talk about everyone else's business. One day, her neighbor approaches her and says "Hey Rachel, I noticed that your car wasn't in the driveway last night. Where did you go?" Rachel is not interested in telling her neighbor where she was last night. May she lie and tell her that she went to the supermarket?
CASE THREE	Moshe is travelling to Israel with his family. When Moshe's family arrived at the airport, someone from airline security was asking his parents a lot of questions. One of the questions they were asked was "Does everything that you are taking to Israel belong to you and your family?" His parents responded yes. At that moment, Moshe realized that before he left, Shimon gave him a small package of candy to deliver to their common friend in Israel and his parents don't know about the package. Should he speak up and tell the security guard that there is something that does not belong to the family?

PLEASE CONSIDER THE FOLLOWING QUESTIONS:

1. Have you ever been in situation where telling a lie was a good way of protecting someone from getting hurt? Were there any other options?
2. In the cases above, does it make a difference if the other person may (or will) find out the truth?
3. Is it possible that someone who lies too often to protect others will become accustomed to lying, even in situations when it is not justified?

When the Torah presents the prohibition against lying, it does not state 'do not lie.' Rather, it states:

Distance yourself from false matters. Shemot 23:7	מדבר שקר תרחק. שמות כג:ז
--	-----------------------------

🔗 WHEN THE TORAH STATES THAT WE SHOULD DISTANCE OURSELVES FROM FALSE MATTERS, WHAT DOES IT MEAN?

"Distance yourself" can mean two different things.

1. Use your judgment to decide what is dishonest.
2. Keep a distance above and beyond what you might think is honest.

Each of these possibilities seems to be reflected in statements in the Talmud:

How do we know that a student who sees his teacher wrongly favor one person over another should not remain silent? Because it is said: Distance yourself from false matters. And how do we know that a student, who sees his teacher making a mistake in the law, should not say, 'I will wait until he finishes, and then disprove his decision, and build up [another decision] according to my own judgment, so that I will be credited for it?' Because it is said: Distance yourself from false matters. [i.e. don't keep silent when you see something false or wrong in order to be credited later for resolving it.] Shevuot 31a (Adapted from Soncino Translation)	מנין לתלמיד שיושב לפני רבו ורואה זכות לעני וחוב לעשיר מנין שלא ישתוק תלמוד לומר מדבר שקר תרחק מנין לתלמיד שרואה את רבו שטועה בדין שלא יאמר אמתין לו עד שיגמרנו ואסתרנו ואבננו משלי כדי שיקרא הדין על שמי ת"ל מדבר שקר תרחק. שבועות לא.
--	---

Giving a false impression can be wrong, even if one does not tell a lie.

🔗 DID ANYBODY TELL A LIE IN EITHER OF THE CASES IN THE TALMUD?

🔗 WHAT DOES THIS TEACH US ABOUT THE EXTENT ONE MUST GO TO BE HONEST?

There are other Talmudic statements that seem to indicate a different approach. The Talmud states:

Our Rabbis taught: How does one praise the bride? Beit Shammai say: Praise the bride based on how she is. And Beit Hillel say: 'Beautiful and graceful bride'! Beit Shammai said to Beit Hillel: If she is ugly, can one call her: 'Beautiful and graceful bride'? Doesn't the Torah say, 'Distance yourself from false matters?' Beit Hillel said to Beit Shammai: According to you, if one has made a bad purchase in the market, should one praise the purchase or make him feel bad? Surely, one should praise it. Therefore, the Sages said: One should always get along with other people. Ketubot 17a (Adapted from Soncino Translation)	תנו רבנן כיצד מרקדין לפני הכלה בית שמאי אומרים כלה כמות שהיא ובית הלל אומרים כלה נאה וחסודה. אמרו להן ב"ש לב"ה הרי שהיתה חיגרת או סומא אומרי' לה כלה נאה וחסודה והתורה אמרה מדבר שקר תרחק אמרו להם ב"ה לב"ש לדבריכם מי שלקח מקח רע מן השוק ישבחנו בעיניו או יגנונו בעיניו הוי אומר ישבחנו בעיניו מכאן אמרו חכמים לעולם תהא דעתו של אדם מעורבת עם הבריות. כתובות יז.
--	--

One should not say something that is offensive, even if it means exaggerating.

According to Beit Shammai one may not lie and tell a bride that she looks nice, if in reality, she doesn't. According to Beit Hillel, exaggerating is sometimes part of our obligation to get along with other individuals.

🔗 DO YOU THINK BEIT HILLEL'S RULING IS LIMITED TO CASES WHERE SOME PEOPLE MAY ACTUALLY CONSIDER THE BRIDE TO BE BEAUTIFUL AND GRACEFUL?

There is another Talmudic passage that takes Beit Hillel's idea one step further:

R. Ila'a further stated in the name of R. Elazar son of R. Shimon: One may modify a statement in the interests of peace ... R. Natan said: It is a commandment. Yevamot 65b (Adapted from Soncino Translation)	וא"ר אילעא משום רבי אלעזר בר' שמעון מותר לו לאדם לשנות בדבר השלום ... ר' נתן אומר מצוה. יבמות סה:
---	--

It is permissible to bend the truth for the purpose of preserving peace.

It is not only permissible to lie for the sake of peace, it is a mitzvah. The Gemara, Baba Metzia 23b, states that it is permissible to lie for similar matters such as protecting one's own privacy and being humble about one's accomplishments.

IF LYING IS SO TERRIBLE THAT THE TORAH TELLS US TO KEEP A SAFE DISTANCE FROM ALL FALSE MATTERS, HOW IS IT POSSIBLE THAT WE ARE ALLOWED TO LIE FOR THE SAKE OF PEACE OR TO GET ALONG WITH OTHERS?

There are a number of approaches to answer this question:

1. Rabbeinu Yonah, *Sha'arei Teshuva* 3:381, writes that when a lie does not affect anyone else negatively it is less serious and therefore, the rabbis permitted those types of lies in certain cases. If the consequence of the lie is insignificant, the precious value of peace overrides the prohibition. Rabbeinu Yonah alludes to the concept of pro-social lying (discussed on page four).
2. Ritva, *Ketubot* 17a, states that peace is more important than truth. When these important values conflict, peace can sometimes take precedence over truth.
3. In *Hilchot Dei'ot*, Rambam teaches us that our character traits must be balanced and each individual must find the perfect balance that is most appropriate for them. In the middle of this discussion, Rambam states the following:

One should not mislead with one's words, or add or detract [from them] unless it is for matters of peace and other similar matters.
Rambam, *Hilchot Dei'ot* 5:7

ולא ישנה בדבורו ולא יוסיף ולא יגרע אלא בדברי
שלום וכיוצא בהן.
רמב"ם הל' דעות ה:ז

R. Yerucham F. Perlow, *Sefer HaMitzvot LaRasag, Aseh* no. 22 and R. Yosef D. Soloveitchik, *Reshimot Shiurim, Sh'vuot* 31a, suggest that for Rambam, when dealing with matters that don't negatively affect other people (monetarily or in any other way), honesty is a character trait. While speaking truthfully is very important, one must find the proper balance and at times, bend the truth in order to preserve peace. The focus is less on the act lying but on being an honest person. Sometimes this requires one to be proactive and speak up on false matters. Other times, it means balancing honesty with other values.

According to R. Perlow and R. Soloveitchik, we can now understand what the Torah meant when it states "distance yourself from false matters," and not 'don't lie.' In most cases we must keep a safe distance away from lies, even if we are not actually telling lies. Nevertheless, there are some rare cases where we must use our judgment to determine whether bending the truth is appropriate. We must find the proper balance between being truthful and getting along with others.

WHAT DO YOU THINK IS A PROPER WAY TO BALANCE TRUTH AND OTHER VALUES?

CAN YOU THINK OF EXAMPLES WHERE TRUTH TAKES PRECEDENCE OVER OTHER VALUES AND EXAMPLES WHERE OTHER VALUES TAKE PRECEDENCE OVER TRUTH?

BASED ON THE DISCUSSION, HOW WOULD YOU DEAL WITH THE CASES PRESENTED ABOVE?

COMPILED BY RABBI JOSH FLUG, DIRECTOR OF TORAH RESEARCH, CJF

BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCHES OF AUTHORS CITED

Rabbeinu Yonah of Gerona (d. 1263) was a Spanish scholar. He is most well known for his ethical works such as *Sha'arei Teshuva* and his *Commentary on Pirkei Avot*. He originally opposed the philosophical works of Rambam, but he viewed the burning of the Talmud in 1242 as a sign that he was incorrect in opposing Rambam's philosophical works.

R. Yom Tov ben Avraham Ishbilli (also known as Ritva, 1250-1330) was a Spanish scholar. He is most well known for his *Commentary on the Talmud*. His clear and concise comments make his *Commentary* popular among those who study commentaries on the Talmud.

R. Moshe ben Maimon (also known as Rambam and Maimonides, 1138-1204) is one of the most famous rabbis in Jewish history. His works on Jewish law and Jewish philosophy are extremely influential and are studied regularly by students of Jewish law and philosophy. He began his life in Cordoba, Spain but eventually settled in Egypt.

R. Yerucham F. Perlow (1846-1934) was born in Warsaw, Poland. He studied under R. Yehoshua L. Diskin, R. Naftali Z.Y. Berlin, and R. Chaim Soloveitchik. In 1926, he settled in the Land of Israel. He is most well known for his encyclopedic three volume work on the *Sefer HaMitzvot* of R. Sa'adiah Gaon.

R. Yosef D. Soloveitchik (1903-1993) was born in Pruzhan, Poland, the son of Rabbi Moshe Soloveitchik, and grandson of Rabbi Chaim HaLevi. In 1932, he moved to America and settled in Boston. He founded Yeshivat Rambam—the Maimonides School—and delivered weekly shiurim there for many years. In 1941, he succeeded his father, upon the latter's passing, as rosh yeshiva at the Rabbi Isaac Elchanan Theological Seminary (Yeshiva University), commuting from Boston to New York each week for over four decades. His shiurim in halachah and aggadah, which reached to the ends of the Jewish world, made a profound impact on Torah learning in our times. He was known by many as "The Rav" to connote that he was his generation's quintessential teacher of Torah, ordaining more rabbis than any other in his generation.

IS IT EVER NORMAL TO LIE? A PARENT'S GUIDE

By Rona Novick, PhD,

*Director, Fanya Gottesfeld Heller Division of Doctoral Studies,
Azrieli Graduate School of Jewish Education and Administration, Yeshiva University*

There is the typical age when children take their first steps, the common age at which they say their first words, and even the average age of when they tell their first lie. Honesty, like most other skills and traits in children develops over time, its progress fueled by the two engines of development – the child's biological maturation and the child's environment. The biology of muscles and joints predicts walking, but it is the biology of the developing brain and children's ability to think that affects lying and honesty. This, paired with the contributions from family and school move a child forward in his/her understanding of the importance of telling the truth.

Lying in the preschool years may be a function of the young child's ability to understand the importance of pleasing others and doing the right thing, coupled with limited appreciation for what lying is and that it is wrong. A toddler found with broken vase in hand is likely to say "no, I didn't break it" when asked, because she wants to give her parent the "right" answer, the response that will make her parent happy. As children go through their elementary school years, they develop more sophisticated thinking, allowing them to understand that the "right" answer is the honest answer, even if it means saying something that parents or teachers do not want to hear. There is no specific age when these advances in moral development occur, with some children demonstrating earlier mastery of honesty than others. Secondary school students (pre-teens and teens) usually have developed the cognitive abilities to understand right from wrong and internalize some moral values. It is exactly at this time, however, that they take significant steps towards autonomy and independence. This move away from the influence of parents and adults has been used to explain the fairly high rates of adolescents who lie to their parents.

Despite children's on-going moral development and understanding of lying as a bad thing, research suggests that older children actually lie more than younger children. Why despite greater moral capacity do older children lie more often than when they had less ability to understand its moral consequences. It is important to recognize that research suggests the largest percentage of children's lies are actually intended to help or to keep others from harm. When a child tells grandma that he loves the scarf she made for him, or denies knowing a friend's locker combination when a classmate wants to take something without permission, he is engaging in pro-social lying, the goal being to safeguard a person or their feelings. Much less common are self-enhancement lies, which children engage in to save face, avoid punishment or disapproval, Selfish lying, used to protect yourself at another's expense, and anti-social lying, done to deliberately harm another, are much less common, thankfully.

At all ages, parents certainly help shape children's ideas about lying, and how they engage in it. Parents can inadvertently invite lying when they ask children questions to which they already know the answer, and when children feel a lie will save humiliation or punishment. When school has called to inform you of a transgression, asking the child "so, how was your day?" creates the opportunity for a less than full and truthful response. Saying instead "I heard from school that there were some difficulties today. Before you tell me your ideas about what happened, I want to remind you how important it is to me that you are honest and tell me the whole story." Of course, parents cannot promise that all will be fine if you just tell the truth. Parents can underscore that the truth is essential and congratulate the courage and integrity involved in admitting one's errors. In such interactions, parents support their children's moral growth and the value of honesty Torah traditions encourage.