+shammai1115+

When lying is the right thing to do

Shammai Engelmayer

God lied—but that is okay.

Before we get to what must seem to be a startling and even heretical statement, let us explore lying in general, the apparent norm these days, especially in the public sphere. Donald Trump is reported to have lied nearly 13,500 times in his first 1,000 days in office. Senate Majority Leader Mitch McConnell (R-Ky) lies to himself almost as much as he lies to everyone else. House Intelligence Committee Chairman Rep. Adam Schiff (D-Calif.) was caught in at least one untruth, and false facts have been a staple of the Democratic debates. Speaking with a forked tongue to gain advantage is a fact of life on all sides of the political aisle. (The phrase “forked tongue” was first used by the British playwright Ben Jonson in 1601 and probably has its origin in the serpent episode in Genesis 3.)

Politics aside, we all lie at one time or another. On the face of it, at least, from the Torah to the Sages of Blessed Memory, lying violates God’s law. Lying is a sin. “Keep far from a false matter,” the Torah commands (see Exodus 23:7). Do not “testify falsely against your neighbor” (see Exodus 20:13 and Deuteronomy 5:17), and do “not carry false rumors” (see Exodus 23:1). As for our leaders, they must be “men of truth” (see Exodus 18:21). The prophet Zechariah quoted God as saying to all of us, “Speak the truth to one another…, do not love falsehood…[for] these things I hate ….Love truth….” (See Zechariah 8:16, 19.)

The prophets railed against rampant falsehoods. “Truth is fallen in the street…,” cried Isaiah; “truth is absent,” (See Isaiah 59:14-15). A despairing Jeremiah warned against trusting anyone, “for every brother acts deceitfully, and every neighbor goes about with slanders….[They] will not speak the truth; they have taught their tongue to speak lies….” (See Jeremiah 9:3-4.)

Telling the truth, on the other hand, brings us closer to God. In the words of Psalm 15, “The one who walks uprightly, and does what is right, and speaks truth from his heart; whose tongue did not slander” will find a place on “[God’s] holy mountain.”

To our Sages, truth is a foundation-stone of the world. “Rabban Shimon ben Gamaliel used to say: on three things does the world stand: On justice, on truth and on peace.” (See Mishnah Avot 1:18.) That is why, in the view of Maimonides, the Rambam, lying was one of the “major sins,” carrying with it the most severe of punishments. (See his Mishneh Torah, Repentance, 1:2.)

Finally, we are commanded to emulate God’s positive qualities and, as Moses noted, God is “never false, true and upright is He.” (See Deuteronomy 32:4.)

How, then, could I begin this column with the words, “God lied—but that is okay”?

There is a category of lies that is acceptable, albeit to be used as a last resort, judiciously and with great care. It is the category known as “the white lie.”

In the Torah, God engages in at least one white lie and even commands Moses to tell one to pharaoh. Joseph’s brothers also engage in a white lie, for which they are praised by our Sages.

God’s white lie is found in this week’s Torah portion, Vayera. Abraham had just been told that 89-year-old Sarah will bear a child. Sarah overheard this and laughed to herself, saying, “Now that I am withered, am I to have enjoyment—*with my husband so old*?” [Emphasis added] God was not happy with Sarah’s attitude, but He also recognized that quoting what she said about Abraham would hurt the patriarch, and perhaps even lead to strife between husband and wife, so He edited Sarah’s words. “Then the Lord said to Abraham, ‘Why did Sarah laugh, saying, “Shall I in truth bear a child, *old as I am*?”’” [Emphasis added] So great is keeping peace between a husband and wife, the Talmud says, that even God resorts to a white lie once in a while. (See the Babylonian Talmud tractate Yevamot 65b.)

At the Burning Bush, God directed Moses to tell a white lie to pharaoh. “[And] you shall say to him, ‘The Lord, the God of the Hebrews, manifested Himself to us. Now therefore, let us go a distance of three days into the wilderness to sacrifice to the Lord our God.’” (See Exodus 3:18.) Moses subsequently did as asked, albeit in words of his own.

This puzzled the Sages. Why would God ask Moses to say “three days” when He intended for the Israelites to leave for good? Says Exodus Rabbah 3:8, “So that the Egyptians might be mistaken and pursue them on their departure, thinking: ‘He [their God] has redeemed them, only that they might go on a three days’ journey to sacrifice to Him, but they of their own accord have tarried all this while.’” This suggests that the white lie was meant to protect God’s reputation. The Midrash, however, adds another possibility: It was to lull the Egyptians into thinking God would abandon Israel for violating His “three days” command, making pursuit possible. This would turn the “white lie” into a real one, meant to lure the Egyptians into a trap; a subsequent commentator softened that by suggesting that lying to the enemy in wartime is permissible.

Others who have commented on the verse over the ages have offered different explanations. Abravanel and others offered this one, as explained by the commentator Rabbi Umberto Cassuto: Moses was commanded to “make a modest and limited request,” because pharaoh’s “refusal would clearly prove that he persists in his stubbornness and that he is absolutely determined to keep the heavy yoke of bondage on the necks of the Israelites permanently and incessantly.”

Joseph’s brothers told him a white lie after their father died. They feared that with Jacob gone, Joseph would feel free to exact his revenge on them for selling him into slavery. Thus we learn in BT Yevamot 65b: “It is permitted for a person to tell a falsehood in a matter [for the sake of]  peace, as it is stated [regarding the message in Genesis 50:16-17 that his brothers sent to Joseph]: ‘Your father commanded [this before he died]: “So shall you say to Joseph: Forgive, I urge you[, the offense and guilt of your brothers who treated you so harshly,]” etc.’” Not only is such a white lie permitted (Jacob made no such request), Yevamot quotes Rabbi Natan as saying “it is a mitzvah” to do so in the name of keeping the peace among people, in this case by avoiding a potentially dangerous situation.

This principle is carried out in other areas, as well. For example, in BT Ketubot 17a, there is a debate between the Schools of Shammai and Hillel regarding what to say of a bride at her wedding. Beit Shammai says one should find something nice to say about her. Beit Hillel says to refer to her as “fair and attractive.”

Beit Shammai protests: What if she was “lame and blind”? The Torah enjoins us to “keep far from a false matter,” and saying “fair and attractive” is a lie. Beit Hillel held its ground, however, and the Sages agreed. The Tosafist explained their reasoning. To follow Beit Shammai’s opinion (to say “the bride has beautiful hair,” for example) would imply that there was nothing else nice to say about her, which turns the praise into a putdown.

In BT Bava Metzia 23b-24a, humility is the issue, which is why scholars should always downplay the extent of their knowledge. This has practical implications for rabbis today, for example. When asked a question of Jewish law, the proper response should always be, “I’ll have to look that up,” even if the rabbi knows the answer.

All this may be summed up simply: Lying for dishonorable reasons is a sin. Lying for honorable reasons is okay, depending on the circumstances. However, in the words of Rabbi Yisrael Meir Kagan, the Chofetz Chaim, in his The Laws of R’chilut 1:8, “If a person can shade the truth so as to avoid telling a total lie…, he should do so and not allow a lie to part from his lips. But if he understands that his fellow will not accept such an answer, it is permitted to tell a total lie for the sake of peace. But he must not—may such desecration be prevented—swear on oath to a lie.”