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Chizuk - Inspiration

In 1937, Reb Yaakov Kamenetzky traveled to America to raise funds for a Yeshivah. Among his first visits was the Manhattan office of a manufacturer. In accordance with customary practice, he presented a copy of the previous year's donation receipt in the hope that he would be provided with a similar donation this year.

After a prolonged delay, the manufacturer returned with a check for an amount lower than that recorded on the receipt.

"This is the amount I actually donated last year," he explained.

"But the receipt records a larger contribution," Reb Yaakov replied.

"I know. Your office deliberately entered a higher amount, hoping that I would match it this year. I remembered giving less, so I checked my records. This check reflects the correct amount."

Deeply disturbed by this disclosure, Reb Yaakov declared, "I cannot represent an institution whose office conducts itself dishonestly."

As he rose to leave, the donor stopped him. "Please take the check for now," he urged.

"No. In my mind, I resigned a moment ago. I am no longer the Yeshivah's Meshulach (representative) and therefore have no authority to accept funds on its behalf."

The manufacturer was astonished. "Do you not have a family to support?"

"Yes—a wife and six children."

"Then please accept this," the man said, taking two hundred dollars from his wallet.

Reb Yaakov drew back. "I do not accept gifts."

"Then consider it a loan until you find another position."

"Thank you, but Hashem will provide. I do not need a loan."

Reb Yaakov returned his portfolio and donor lists to the Yeshivah office. The following day, he encountered Reb Alter Poplack, an old friend from the Slobodka Yeshiva, who recommended him for the position of interim rabbi at Congregation Bikur Cholim in Seattle. Reb Yaakov served there for six months before relocating to Toronto, where he became the Rav of Congregation Toras Emes.

Halacha – Jewish Law

QUESTION: It is known that one may sometimes lie to preserve the peace (e.g., to avoid embarrassing someone or hurting their feelings). Does that permission apply when the same goal can be achieved without an outright lie? I have in mind the use of a misleading statement to keep the peace, that could also be understood in a technically truthful way (a "Statement With Two Meanings").

For example, imagine my wife spends hours cooking a beef stew for a special occasion. Unfortunately, the meat turns out incredibly tough and chewy, making it difficult to eat. My wife anxiously asks me, "How is it? Do you like it?" I smile and say: "Wow, I have never tasted a stew quite like this before!" It is technically true: I have never tasted a stew quite like this one (because of how tough it is). However, it is still misleading, because I am intentionally capitalizing on the positive tone and ambiguity of my words so that my wife interprets it as a high compliment, which masks my true opinion. If I could indeed deceive my wife this way, would I still be allowed to lie to her outright and say that I liked the beef stew?

ANSWER: The matter is debated. When peace can be preserved through a Statement With Two Meanings (Lishna D'Mishtama L'Trei Appei), an outright lie is likely forbidden. This is the ruling of the Niv Sefasayim (Hilchos Issur Sheker, Siman 10; see also Klal 2, se'if 9, and Klal 9, se'if 8).

Rav Chaim Kanievsky ZT"L, in his commentary on Maseches Kusim, cites Sefer Chassidim (Siman 1061) in support of this view and shows that Yaakov Avinu followed this approach. When Yitzchak asked who he was, Yaakov, posing as Eisav, replied, "Anochi Eisav Bechorecha," meaning, "I am Eisav, your

firstborn.” Yet the words can also be read less directly: “It is I [who brings you food]; [however], Eisav is your firstborn” (Bereishis Rabbah 65:18). Yaakov chose this wording even though an outright falsehood may have been permitted (Avodah Zarah 25b). Rav Chaim Palagi (Chofetz Chaim 19:35) likewise cites Sefer Chassidim in support of this ruling.

However, some Halachic authorities explain that the Sefer Chassidim applies only to an exceptionally truthful person—an “Ish Emes”—and not to the average person. Accordingly, these authorities believe that the average person may tell an outright lie to keep the peace even if a Words With Two Meanings statement comes to mind.

The best way to proceed is as follows: If no Statement With Two Meanings comes to mind, one may, in certain circumstances, lie outright to preserve the peace as described in your question. When faced with a question that cannot be answered honestly without hurting another’s feelings, follow these steps:

1. Remain silent or change the subject. If a lie can be avoided entirely, do not lie - strict Halacha forbids lying.
2. Use words with two meanings. If a lie cannot be avoided, use a Statement With Two Meanings.
3. State an outright falsehood. If neither option above is workable, you may lie outright to avoid hurting another’s feelings.

On The Parsha

Parshas Bereishis records Hashem’s first two questions to human beings.

In both cases, Hashem, who knows all, asks a question whose answer He already knows.

After Adam ate from the Eitz HaDa’as (the Tree of Knowledge), Hashem asked him, “Ayeka—where are you?” (Bereishis 3:9). Rashi explains that Hashem knew precisely where Adam was; He asked the question in order to engage Adam gently, so Adam would not be too frightened to respond.

After Kayin murdered Hevel, Hashem asked, “Ayai Hevel Achicha—where is Hevel, your brother?” (4:9). Here Rashi provides further details: Hashem spoke gently, hoping Kayin might repent and confess, “I killed him, and I have sinned against You.”

Each of the questions above gave the individual the opportunity to acknowledge the truth and admit that he had sinned.

Neither seized that opportunity. Adam replied, “The woman whom You gave to be with me, she gave me of the tree” (3:12). Rashi summarizes his response in three devastating words:

“Kan Kafar B’tovah”—here he denied the good. Adam turned Hashem’s great gift—his wife—into an accusation against the Giver.

Kayin’s response was worse: “Lo Yadati—I do not know. Am I my brother’s keeper?” Rashi says that Kayin acted as though he could deceive the One Above.

Yet the story continues. After being punished, Kayin said, “My sin is too great to bear” (4:13). Because he ultimately expressed remorse, his sentence was reduced. The Midrash (Bereishis Rabbah 22:13) relates that Adam later met Kayin and asked what had become of his judgment. Kayin replied that he had done Teshuvah (repented) and received a compromise. Adam exclaimed, “Such is the power of Teshuvah, and I did not know!” He then declared, “Mizmor Shir l’yom haShabbos, Tov l’Hodos laShem—A psalm, a song for the Shabbos day: It is good to give thanks to Hashem.”

The Hebrew word mentioned above, “l’Hodos” – has two meanings: to thank and to admit. Rav Yitzchak Hutner ZT”L examines the connection of these two meanings at length in his Pachad Yitzchak on Chanukah. He explains that gratitude begins with an honest admission that one has received something and is indebted to another. Therefore, gratitude and honesty are strongly connected.

This connection offers a new understanding of Adam’s failure to confess. Had he felt gratitude to Hashem for the wife he had been given, he could not have blamed her. He would have recognized that he alone was responsible and admitted his sin.

Honesty involves more than avoiding falsehood; it also includes the clarity of mind to acknowledge one’s mistakes. Gratitude supports this honesty by helping us recognize what we have received from others, refrain from blaming them, and accept responsibility for our own actions.

*“May I back out of a school carpool that
I have already committed to?”
“Should I report a co-worker who is acting dishonestly?”*

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