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Halacha – Jewish Law

QUESTION: "My sister told someone she was fifty, though she is really 45. Afterward, she explained that people are more likely to compliment her on her youthful appearance if she claims to be older. Is it acceptable for her to do this?"

ANSWER: The question of whether your sister may lie about her age to receive compliments involves a fundamental debate about the scope of the Torah's prohibition against falsehood.

The Chofetz Chaim interprets "Midvar Sheker Tirchak" (Exodus 23:7) as a clear, sweeping Torah prohibition against lying, representing what many consider the normative Halachic position. However, authorities differ: Orech Meisharim limits this to judges in court, while the Sefer Yereim (Mitzvah #235) suggests the prohibition only applies when harm can come from the lie, implying that harmless social lies might not be biblically prohibited, and some Rishonim view the verse as moral advice, not binding law.

According to the stricter view, the Sefer Chareidim, quoting the Rashbatz, rules that even if the falsehood causes no harm, it still constitutes a Torah prohibition. This would directly apply to your sister's situation, where her age misrepresentation harms no one, but still violates the prohibition against falsehood.

The Talmudic discussion in Kesubos 16b-17a explores a relevant debate on this topic. Beis Shammai maintains that only truthful statements should be made about a bride, whereas Beis Hillel allows for praising a bride's beauty even if it is not accurate, prioritizing the groom's happiness. The prevailing view follows Beis Hillel, indicating that certain social falsehoods may be allowed to promote harmony or joy. However, the concept of "Mutar Leshanos Mipnei HaShalom" (permitted to lie for the sake of peace) has defined limitations, as discussed by Rav Nachum Yavrov. Some authorities like the Yam Shel Shlomo suggest that occasional lies for peace are more acceptable than regular patterns of lying. In the case of your sister, where the intention is to seek compliments rather than to maintain

peace or prevent harm, the primary Halachic justifications for deviating from the truth appear to not apply.

However, many contemporary Halachic authorities might apply a more lenient view to your sister's situation, particularly those who follow the Orech Meisharim's limitation of "Midvar Sheker Tirchak" to apply only to judicial contexts or who emphasize the Sefer Yereim's distinction about a lie causing harm which is not the case with your sister fibbing about her age. Nevertheless, it would be advisable to recommend that she seek alternative methods of obtaining positive feedback regarding her appearance that don't involve misrepresentation. Fostering authenticity tends to yield more enduring benefits than pursuing validation through deceptive means.

Chizuk - Inspiration

During a Chol HaMoed trip to Luna Park, my son noticed another park visitor who was walking with his son, who was holding a gigantic stuffed animal.

I asked the man where he had won his prize, and he indicated a booth featuring a basketball challenge. Turning to my son, I asked if he would like me to win an oversized stuffed animal for him – "Yes!" was his enthusiastic response. We proceeded to the game area with this objective in mind. Drawing upon my background as a basketball player in my youth, I felt confident in my ability to win.

The booth was crowded, and we waited our turn. The pricing structure was \$5 for one shot or \$10 for three shots, with a single successful basket securing the large prize. Underestimating the difficulty, I opted for one attempt, paid \$5, and missed. My son's disappointment prompted me to try again, but another \$5 yielded the same result. Recognizing the challenge, I decided on three more attempts for \$10, resolving that this would be my final effort.

After missing the first two shots, everything hinged on my last opportunity. I concentrated, aimed, and released the ball; it struck the rim and bounced back into my hands. Although

official rules did not permit a rebound shot, I instinctively took another shot, and this time the ball landed in the basket. The booth attendant, seeing only my final basket, announced my victory over the microphone. Wishing to act with honesty and integrity, particularly in front of a crowd, I explained that the winning shot occurred after a rebound and thus did not comply with the game's rules – I did not really win. In response, the attendant stated that I deserved the prize for being honest and presented my son with the stuffed animal. My son was ecstatic – he won his prize and learned a powerful lesson that day.

On The Parsha

"Ask your father and he will tell you; your elders and they will recount to you." (Devarim 32:7)

In the verse above, Rashi explains that "your father" refers to the Prophets and "your elders" refers to the Sages. He explains that their role is to tell you the truth about the past: both the punishments of Hashem (generation of Enosh, generation of the Flood) and the promises of His reward (the Messianic Era and the World to Come).

We see from this Rashi that true honesty requires telling the complete story—not just the parts that make us look good or comfortable. Rashi emphasizes two dimensions of historical honesty that must work together.

"Recall the olden days" means reflecting on what happened to former generations who did not follow Hashem's way and thus provoked Him. This requires us to honestly confront our failures, acknowledging our mistakes and moral declines. Rashi specifically mentions the generation of Enosh, whom Hashem "engulfed with the water of the ocean," and the generation of the Flood, whom the Creator of the World "washed away."

Historical honesty demands that we do not sanitize or minimize the severity of past events or make excuses for our moral failures. The Prophets and Sages had the integrity to say: "This is what happened. This is where we failed. This is the consequence of provoking Hashem." This kind of honesty is painful but essential. It means acknowledging where we or our community have fallen short, not rewriting history to make ourselves the heroes of every story. We must accept that sometimes the righteous were punished, the wicked prospered for a time, and be truthful about the complexity and difficulty of our journey.

On the other hand, there are times when we are not ready for the truth. For example, in the Talmud in Berachos (27b and on), Rabban Gamliel II was deposed from his position and replaced with Rabbi Elazar Ben Azaryah. Rabban Gamliel was overly strict in who he would admit to the Beis HaMidrash (study hall). After he was temporarily deposed, he witnessed a remarkable renaissance of Torah learning and became somewhat depressed, thinking, "Perhaps, Heaven forbid, I limited Torah from Israel (from being overly strict on who I did not permit to enter the Bais HaMidrash)." To comfort him, he received a dream from Heaven telling him that the new students that he would not have let in were not that worthy. However, the Talmud explains that the message in the dream was not true; it was given just to placate him.

Rashi further adds a crucial second dimension: "You did not pay attention to the past; now, be sure to pay attention to the future, that He has the power to reward you by letting you inherit the Messianic Era and the World to Come." Historical honesty is not about dwelling on failure. It is equally dishonest to ignore hope and possibility. The same sages who tell us hard truths about the past also offer hopeful truths about the future: Hashem can reward us, letting us inherit the Messianic Era and the World to Come. This is not naive optimism, but an honest recognition of the potential that lies ahead. Just as it would be dishonest to ignore past failures, it is equally dishonest to ignore future hope and possibilities.

*"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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