



D'var Torah Lech Lecha, 5784 - Oct. 28, 2023

By Eve Menzin on her Bat Mitzvah

SHABBAT SHALOM!

Let me tell you a Talmudic story (TB Yevamot 63a):

There was a rabbi named Rav who would always have either peas or lentils for dinner. When he came home, the rabbi would ask his wife either for peas or for lentils. No matter what he asked, however, his wife would make the opposite of his request. If he asked for peas, she would make lentils. And if he asked for lentils, she would make peas.

One day, Rav was busy so he asked his son, Chiya, to tell his mother to make peas for dinner. Later that night, Rav was surprised that his wife made peas for dinner. He said to Chiya that perhaps he should always be the one to tell his mother what to make for dinner. Chiya then explained to his father that he simply switched the request. He told his mom that his father wanted lentils for dinner, and she made peas, which is what his father really wanted. Rav then taught his son that even though it was a smart idea to switch the the requests, he shouldn't do it anymore because he will teach his tongue to lie,

לְמַדּוֹ לְשׁוֹנֵם דְּבַר־שָׁקֶר

I believe that the story I just told you has deep meaning. It raises some important questions that I have, like, Is it ever okay to lie? Is there a difference between telling a lie or telling a misleading partial

truth? May one lie for a greater good, like peace between husbands and wives? Or between children and parents?

Like any other complicated Jewish question there are a lot of different ideas and opinions on this. Today, I will share some perspectives on these questions.

Before I dive in to find answers, let me tell you how this relates to my Torah portion, *Lech Lecha*. In this *parashah*, Abraham and Sarah go down to Egypt because there is a famine in the Land of Canaan.

"וַיְהִי רָעָב בְּאֶרֶץ מִצְרַיִם וַיֵּרֶד אַבְרָם מִצְרַיִם לְגִיּוֹר שָׁם כִּי־כָבֵד הָרָעָב בְּאֶרֶץ."

"There was a famine in the land, and Abram descended to Egypt to sojourn there because the famine was heavy in the land." (Beresheit 12:10)

When Abraham gets to Egypt he realizes that Pharaoh might want to kill him and take Sarah for his wife. He tells Sarah:

"אִמְרִי־נָא אֶחְתִּי אָתָּה לְמַעַן יֵיטֵב־לִי בְּעַבְדֶּיךָ וְחַיִּתָּה נַפְשִׁי בְּגִלְגָּלְךָ."

Please, say that you are my sister, that it may be well with me on account of you, and that I may live because of you." (Beresheit 12:13)

In other words, Abraham said to Sarah: "Please lie to Pharaoh and tell him you are my sister so that I will get rich and I will not die." So Sarah lies to Pharaoh and tells him that she is Abraham's sister. So, Pharaoh takes Sarah into his royal harem, and makes Abraham rich. But then, Hashem plagues Pharaoh in order to get Abraham and Sarah out. When Pharaoh finds out that Abraham lied to him, he gets really angry and orders Abraham and Sarah to leave immediately. Pharaoh says to Abraham:

"לָמָּה אָמַרְתָּ אֶחְתִּי הִוא וְאָקַח אֶתָּה לִי לְאִשָּׁה וְעַתָּה הִנֵּה אֲשֵׁיךָ קַח וְלֵךְ."

Why did you say, 'She is my sister,' so that I took her to me as a wife? Now, here is your wife. Take her, and go!" (Beresheit 12:17)

In this case, it would appear that Avraham lied for two possible reasons: one, he didn't want Pharaoh to kill him in order to take Sarah

as a wife; and two, Abraham wanted to get rich. Are either of these justifiable reasons for him to ask Sarai to lie?

The Midrash HaGadol suggests that Abraham did not lie at all. Abraham just told the truth in a misleading way. Abraham is Sarah's uncle. The Torah says (Bereishit 11:27):

וַיֵּלֶח אַבְרָם וַנְחֹר לָהֶם נָשִׁים שֵׁם אִשְׁת־אַבְרָם שָׂרָי וְשֵׁם אִשְׁת־נְחֹר מִלְכָּה בַת־הָרָן
אֲבִי־מִלְכָּה וְאֲבִי יִסְכָּה:

Abram and Nahor took wives for themselves, the name of Abram's wife being Sarah and that of Nahor's wife Milcah, the daughter of Haran, the father of Milcah and Iscah.

The Rabbis interpret this verse to mean that Abraham's brother Haran had two daughters Milcah and Iscah. Abraham's other brother Nahor married his niece Milcah and Abraham married the other sister Iscah. Iscah is another name that Sarah had. Thus, Sarah was a relative of Abraham.

So, the midrash says that when Sarah said that she was Abraham's sister, she meant that they were related. But is telling the truth in a misleading way any different from lying? To me, the person who is communicating has the responsibility to make sure the person that they are talking to understands. People have a reason why they want to know something. In Pharaoh's case he wants to know whether he can marry Sarah. Pharaoh wanted to know if Abraham and Sarah were married. Sarah said that they were sister and brother. Sarah made Pharaoh think that they were not married even though they were. I would consider this a lie because Abraham and Sarai made Pharaoh think the opposite of what was true. Sometimes the lie *lies* in what you don't say as much as in what you do say.

Now, if Abraham told Sarah to lie in order to get rich, that's a big problem. But what about if they were trying to save his life? Would it be okay to lie then? I could imagine us saying that would be a legitimate

reason to lie, but let's also not forget that by saving Abraham, they were also bringing danger upon Sarah. Why is that okay?

I have another question. Is it okay to lie to bring peace, or to bring people together? I have a story about Aaron the Kohen Gadol, the high priest, that will help us answer this question.

The rabbinic work called Avot D'Rabbi Natan teaches that when two Israelites had an argument, Aaron would first sit with one of them and say that the other person with whom they argued really wants to make peace. Then, Aaron would go to the second person, and tell him the same thing. The two people would meet, and when they saw each other they would forgive each other immediately and make up.

This story seems to say that it is okay to lie to bring people together as long as you make sure no harm will be done by lying. Aaron did this by sitting with both parties in the dispute. He would work with each one until there was truth to his assertion that each one wanted to make peace. In other words, it may have started out that he lied to get people to make up, but by the end, the original lies transform into truths.

The problem with this approach is that lying in this way may not always turn out to have a happy ending. If the people didn't want to make up, then Aaron would just be a liar who misrepresented how each party felt. I still think that you are allowed to lie to make peace as long as you make sure that what you are doing will work and it won't cause bigger problems for you and the two people in the argument.

If you may lie to bring people together in peace, may you lie in order that someone will be saved from dishonor and shame? A story from the Talmud can assist us to answer this question.

Once, a rabbi was giving a lecture to many students including Rabbi Chiya. At one point during the lecture, the rabbi declared that he could not continue and was losing focus because someone in the class

smelled too strongly of garlic. He asked for the smelly student to please excuse himself. Even though it wasn't him, Rabbi Chiya left the room. He left because he knew it would not ruin his reputation. However, if one of the younger students left, it could negatively impact upon their standing and future. After Rabbi Chiya left, all the students followed his example and left too.

This story seems to allow people to create a misperception in order to keep someone from shame or embarrassment. But you still have to think about all the consequences and whether it is worth it. Rabbi Chiya, for example, may not have considered the fact that he kept all the non-smelly students from hearing the lecture. If you can lie to save someone, and to bring people together, and you can lie to save people from shame, are you allowed to also lie about yourself in order to be modest? I have a story about the Chofetz Chaim that will help us find out.

The Chofetz Chaim was a rabbi who lived in Poland at the beginning of the 20th century. His nickname, the Chofetz Chaim, is taken from the name of the book he wrote on the evils of gossip and slander. It comes from a *pasuk* in Tehillim (34:13-14):

מִי־הָאִישׁ הַחֹפֵץ חַיִּים אֲהֵב יָמִים לְרֹאוֹת טוֹב:

Who is the person who is eager for life,
who desires years of good fortune?

נֹצֵר לְשׁוֹנֵה מִרַע וּשְׂפָתַיךָ מִדִּבַּר מְרָמָה:

Guard your tongue from evil,
your lips from deceitful speech.

So, the Chofetz Chaim was on a train to the Polish city of Radin. He was traveling back home from a town where he went to teach. The person next to him asked him why he was going to Radin. The Chofatz

Chaim replied it was because he lived in the town. The person next to him said that he was going to Radin because he wanted to meet the amazing Chofetz Chaim who was so brilliant and had so much wisdom. The Chofetz Chaim said to the man who didn't know who he really was, that the Chofetz Chaim, who the man was seeking wasn't really that great and he wasn't that smart. The man got so upset that his traveling companion was bad mouthing the Chofetz Chaim that he punched the Chofetz Chaim in the face.

When the train stopped they both got off. The man who punched the Chofetz Chaim saw that there was a whole bunch of people waiting at the station with a band playing. The man asked one of the people in the band why they were there. The man answered that they were there to greet the Chofetz Chaim. The man was so disappointed that he had been on a train with the Chofetz Chaim and didn't get to talk to him. The man asked the band player to point out who the Chofetz Chaim was, and the band player pointed to the person on the train that he had punched. The man realized his mistake and begged the Chofetz Chaim for forgiveness. The Chofetz Chaim forgave him and said that he learned an important lesson from this: you shouldn't do *lashon harah* even against yourself. This means that you cannot lie about yourself in order to be modest and not sound arrogant.

So, after all this, when are we allowed to lie? Well, first, if you have a good reason for lying, you may lie in a case where the person will eventually find out the truth. I will call this a temporary lie. Additionally, you may lie if the lie you tell will not lead them to be angry with you. Most importantly, you should only lie for a good reason if the lie solves a problem, but not if it merely avoids the problem, or worse - creates bigger problems.

You may remember that at the beginning of this I told you a story about the rabbi who had peas or lentils for dinner. The son was not

allowed to lie in that situation because it did not solve the problem of how the rabbi and his wife got along. It completely avoided it.

Aaron the high priest was allowed to lie because the two people who had argued found out at the end. They were not angry because of the lie at any point. And it did solve the problem of their argument.

Rabbi Chiya was allowed to lie because his lie was revealed once everyone left after him. No one got angry because of it. And it solved the problem by saving someone from getting embarrassed.

The Chofetz Chaim's lie wasn't allowed because he made the man angry.

Now, what about Avraham? Since his lie made Pharaoh angry once he found out what he did was wrong. He also endangered Sarah. And while he did save himself from harm, he also got rich from the lie, which complicates his motivation.

So, even though he was still a very righteous person, even righteous people make mistakes, like how the Chofetz Chaim did too.

I can learn a lot from this on the occasion of my becoming a Bat Mitzvah. I can learn from this that I should be careful when I communicate to people and make sure I am telling them the whole truth. If I can't be completely truthful I have to think about how my actions affect other people. Most importantly, I can learn that it is okay if I mess up and tell a lie when I shouldn't, that I should learn from it, do better next time, and move on like Avraham.

I want to thank all of you for coming. Those of you who came from around the corner to those of you who came here from out of state. I also want to make sure to thank everyone who helped out in any way. I really appreciate it. I also want to thank Jeff Remz for tutoring me and preparing me for this moment. I wouldn't have learned it without your help. I want to thank everyone who hosted all our out-of-town guests. I want to thank my mom for figuring out so many

logistics to make sure we can celebrate in the best way possible. I want to thank my dad for laying the seventh aliya and for taking a lot of his time to spend on planning my Bat Mitzvah. I want to thank my brother, Lev, for coming all the way from Wisconsin even though today is the game against Ohio State. I want to thank Ari for always supporting me and always making a funny joke. I want to thank Isaac for laying the fifth aliya even if it took some convincing. Lastly, I want to thank Minyan Ma'or for its amazing community that I have been part of for my whole life.

While this is a really happy occasion and milestone in my life, I want to acknowledge the hardships that Israel has been going through. Now that I am a Bat Mitzvah I have the responsibility to help and support Israel. I have been doing this by reading tehilim on the way to school every day. One that I really like is Psalm 20. It is on your handout. Please join with me in saying this Psalm line by line.

לְמִנְצַחַם מִזְמוֹר לְדָוִד:
יְעִנֶנְךָ יְהוָה בְּיוֹם צָרָה יִשְׁגְּבֶנְךָ שָׁם | אֱלֹהֵי יַעֲקֹב
יִשְׁלַח עֲזָרְךָ מִקֹּדֶשׁ וּמִצִּיּוֹן יִסְעָדֶךָ
יִזְכֹּר כָּל־מִנְחֹתֶיךָ יְעוֹלָתֶיךָ יְדִשְׁנֶנּוּ סֵלָה: יִתֵּן־לֶךָ כָּל־בִּבְרָה וְכָל־עֲצָתְךָ
יִמְלֵא: נְרַנְּנָה | בְּיִשׁוּעֶתְךָ וּבְשֵׁם־אֱלֹהֵינוּ כִּדְגַל יִמְלֵא יְהוָה כָּל־מִשְׁאֲלוֹתֶיךָ: עֲתָה
יִדְעֵתִי כִּי הוֹשִׁיעַ | יְהוָה מִשִּׁיחוֹ יַעֲנֵהוּ מִשְׁמֵי קִדְשׁוֹ בְּגִבּוֹרוֹת יִשַׁע יִמִּינוּ: אֱלֹהֵי בְרַכָּב
וְאֱלֹהֵי בְּסוּסִים וְאֲנַחְנוּ | בְּשֵׁם־יְהוָה אֱלֹהֵינוּ נִזְכִּיר: הִמָּה כָרְעוּ וְנִפְּלוּ וְאֲנַחְנוּ קָמְנוּ
וְנִתְעוֹדֵד: יְהוָה הוֹשִׁיעָה הַמְּלֶךְ יַעֲנֵנוּ בְּיוֹם־קִרְאָנוּ

I like this psalm because it is relevant to experiencing right now. It talks about asking help for Israel which, I think, is on all of our minds right now. I hope that there is peace in Israel soon.

SHABBAT SHALOM