
CAN YOU EVER TELL A LIE?

The Torah's treatment of the topic of truth and falsehood is exquisitely sensitive. The mitzvah to "distance ourselves from falsehood" is not only a prohibition against outright verbal lies that cause direct or indirect loss to another, but includes a prohibition against any gesture or even an act of silence that results in a deceptive message being understood by the observer.

Even so, the Torah allows one to alter the truth for the sake of pursuing peace, fulfilling a mitzvah, praising a bride, and maintaining one's humility and modesty. This leniency is only permitted where the falsehood does not affect anyone else adversely, there are no other means available, and one does not do it regularly. Finally, one who strives to be truthful in all his affairs is "walking in God's ways" and helps to sustain the entire world.

This class will address the following questions:

- What determines if something is a lie: the words you say or the message understood by the listener?
- If you remain silent and it results in a deceptive message, is that called a lie?
- What if everyone "bends the truth" and "massages the numbers"? Maybe then falsehood is fine?
- Are there cases where one may indeed alter the truth?
- If so, does this mean that any means, including lies, can be justified by a noble end?!

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SECTION I. HONESTY AND INTEGRITY: THE MITZVAH TO AVOID FALSEHOOD

As an introduction to Judaism's attitude to lying, consider the following situation:

A non-Jewish religious leader was teaching his congregation about the incident involving Rachav and the two spies (Yehoshua/Joshua 2:1-24). Briefly, two Jewish spies were sent by Yehoshua on a reconnaissance mission to Jericho before it would be conquered, as the Jewish people prepared to enter the Land of Israel. A rumor spread that spies were present in the city. A woman named Rachav, who ran a brothel, hid the spies on her roof. When she was asked by the authorities to hand over the spies, she said that they had already left the city.

The religious leader said that Rachav had done the right thing, just as people hiding Jews from the Nazi's had to lie.

His congregants disagreed with him, saying that one always has to tell the truth, even at the cost of a life. The religious leader disagreed, saying that one can lie and repent afterwards.

Who was right: the non-Jewish religious leader or his congregants?
(We will address this specific case at the end of Section IV.)

As we shall see, in Judaism there are certain limited cases when it is appropriate to alter the truth, for that in itself is the truth. Let us now investigate Judaism's approach to truth and falsehood:

1. **Shemot (Exodus) 23:7 - The Torah instructs us to “distance ourselves” from falsehood.**

Distance yourself from falsehood.

מִדְּבַר שֶׁקֶר תִּרְחָק:

What is meant by the phrase “*distance* yourself from falsehood”? Why does it not just say “do not tell a lie”?

2. **Sefer HaChinuch, Mitzvah # 74 – The unique prohibition against falsehood: Not just “do not tell a lie” but “distance yourself from falsehood” to indicate an abhorrence of falsehood and a love for truth, which is the way of God.**

The root of this mitzvah is well known: falsehood is abominable and corrupt in the eyes of all. There is nothing more abhorrent than it. Desolation and curse [is found] in the home of those who love falsehood ...

And blessing is only found and will only take effect upon those who emulate Him in their actions: to be truthful just as He is a God of truth; to have compassion, as it is known that He is compassionate; to do acts of loving-kindness, just as He abounds in loving-kindness [c.f. Rashi, Devarim 11:22].

For this reason the Torah cautions us to distance ourselves exceedingly from falsehood, as it is written: “*Distance* yourself from falsehood”

שׁוֹרֵשׁ הַמִּצְוָה יָדוּעַ, כִּי הַשֶּׁקֶר נִתְעַב וְנֹאֲלָח בְּעֵינֵי הַכֹּל, אֵין דְּבַר מֵאוֹס מִמֶּנּוּ, וְהַמְאָרָה וְהַקְּלָלוֹת בְּבֵית כָּל אוֹהֲבָיו...

ואֵין הַבְּרָכָה מִצְוִיָּה וְחֻלָּה אֵלֶּא בַּמִּתְדַמִּים אֵלָיו בַּמַּעֲשִׂיָּהֶם, לְהִיּוֹתָם אִמִּיתִים כְּמוֹ שֶׁהוּא אֵל אֱמֶת, וְלִהְיוֹתָם מִרְחָמִים כְּמוֹ שִׁידוּעַ שֶׁהוּא רַחוּם, וְלִהְיוֹתָם גּוֹמְלֵי חֲסָדִים כְּמוֹ שֶׁהוּא רַב הַחֲסֵד ...

ועַל כֵּן הִזְהִירָתָנוּ הַתּוֹרָה לְהִרְחִיק מִן הַשֶּׁקֶר הַרְבֵּה, כְּמוֹ שֶׁכָּתוּב מִדְּבַר שֶׁקֶר תִּרְחָק, וְהִנֵּה הַזְכִּירָה בּוֹ לְשׁוֹן רִיחֻק

(Shemot 23:7). In stating the mitzvah, the Torah uses the word “distance” [as a verb], which it does not do regarding any other mitzvah, to [indicate] the disgusting nature [of falsehood].

לרוב מייאוסו מה שלא הזכירה כן בכל שאר האזהרות...

3. **Chofetz Chaim, Sefat Tamim, Ch. 7, p. 26 – Being truthful is one of the ways to fulfill the mitzvah to be like God.**

[Acting truthfully and avoiding falsehood] is a fulfillment of the mitzvah to “walk in God’s ways” (Devarim 28:9, see Morasha class *Being Like God*).

As the Sifri explains the verse “To walk in all of His ways,” (Devarim 10:12): “These are the ways of the Holy One, Blessed be He: ‘God, God, Lord, Compassionate and Gracious, Slow to anger, Abundant in Kindness and *Truth* ...’” (Shemot 34:6).

והוא מקיים בזה המצוות עשה דוהלכת בדרכיו,

וכדאיתא בספרי על הפסוק ללכת בכל דרכיו: אלו דרכי הקב"ה, ה' ה' קל רחום וחנון ארך אפים ורב חסד ואמת וגו'.

4. **Rabbeinu Yonah, Shaarei Teshuvah 3:184 – Being truthful is a crucial component to the purity of the soul.**

Misleading people and lying ... is in a sense more serious than theft. This is because speaking falsehood is an act of self-destruction, for truthfulness is one of the foundations of the health of the soul. Therefore, we are obligated to stay within the parameters of truth.

מי שמתעה את חברו ... והנה החטא הזה חמור אצל חכמי ישראל יותר מגזול הנכרי, יען וביען כי שפת שקר אשמה רבה, ונתחייבו על גדרי האמת, כי הוא מיסודי הנפש.

In other words, even though theft affects someone else in the physical world and is a serious offence, speaking falsehood is in a sense more serious since it leaves a stain on the purity of one’s soul, because “truth” is a crucial component of a person’s soul (Rabbi Avrohom Ehrman, Journey to Virtue 10:2).

KEY THEMES OF SECTION I:

- ☞ If asked, most people pride themselves on their honesty and integrity – they don’t tell outright lies, and their words match their actions. But does one have a love for truth? And furthermore, a disgust for falsehood? For this is the standard to which God holds us.
- ☞ The Torah could have simply stated: “Do not tell a lie.” The phrase “distance yourself from falsehood” – used nowhere else in the Torah – indicates the tenaciousness with which every Jew must pursue truth and reject falsehood.
- ☞ On a deeper level, the rejection of falsehood and becoming a more truthful person is one of the ways to fulfill the mitzvah to emulate God, because God describes Himself as “abundant in kindness and truth” (Shemot 34:6). Furthermore, a crucial aspect of the health of a person’s soul is his ability to be truthful.

SECTION II. TRUTH IS THE WILL OF GOD AND IT SUSTAINS THE WORLD

In the previous section we examined the mitzvah to avoid *falsehood*, and to strive for honesty and integrity. In this section we will discuss how Judaism defines and values the idea of “truth.”

1. Rabbi Eliyahu Dessler, *Michtav M'Eliyahu*, Vol. I, p. 94 – Truth is that which accords with the Will of God, and falsehood is that which is the opposite.

What is truth and what is falsehood? When we went to school we were taught that truth is to tell facts as they occurred and falsehood is to deviate from this. This is true in simple cases, but in life many occasions arise when this simple definition no longer applies.

Sometimes it may be *wrong* to “tell the truth” about another person, for example if it would reveal something negative about him, unless there was an overriding purpose and necessity. And sometimes it may be *necessary* to change details, when the plain truth would bring not benefit, but injury. In such cases what appears to be true is false, since it produces evil effects; and what appears to be false may help to achieve the truth.

We had better define truth as that which is conducive to good and which conforms with the Will of the Creator, and falsehood as that which furthers the scheme of the Prince of Falsehood, the power of evil in the world.

מהו אמת ומהו שקר? בתחלת חנוכנו הבינונו, שאמת הוא כשמספרים עובדות כמו שאירעו; ושקר, כשמשנים מזה. אך זהו רק באופנים פשוטים, אבל למעשה יש הרבה אופנים שבהם אין הדבר כן.

לפעמים אסור לומר דברים כמו שהם, כמו לספר מה שיש בו פגם לחבירו, בלי תועלת והכרח, ולפעמים צריך דווקא לשנות, כשהאמת לא יועיל אלא יזיק, כי אז מה שנראה כאמת הוא שקר, שמוליד תוצאות של רע, ומה שנראה כשקר מביא לתכלית של אמת.

נמצא שאמת הוא מה שמביא לטוב ולרצון הבורא, ושקר הוא מה שנותן הצלחה לעסקיו של שר השקר, הסיטרא אחרא.

2. *Ibid.*, Vol. II, p. 139, and Vol. I, p. 117 – When a person has clarity, then the difference between good and evil is as obvious as the difference between truth and falsehood. Adam lost this clarity when he ate from the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil. Our job is to use our free will to regain this clarity.

Before Adam ate from the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil, his pure, untainted intellect only perceived things to be either obviously true or obviously false. He did not perceive things as being “good” or “evil.”

In other words, when a person sees with pristine clarity the repugnance of evil and the beauty of good, then he sees in every matter a simple choice of truth over falsehood. Because, on a deeper level, “good” is really that which accords with the Will of God, and it alone is truth and

חלק ב', דף קל"ט: אדם הראשון קודם החטא לא ידע את הטוב והרע, שהם ה"נאה" וה"מגונה", אבל בשלימות שכלו הוא הבחין רק בין אמת ושקר [רמב"ם, מורה נבוכים ח"א פ"ב].

וביאור הדברים, כי כאשר רואים אנו בבהירות מוחלטת את רעת הרע ואת טובת הטוב, הרי ממילא רואים אנו בכל רק “אמת” או “שקר”. פירושו: שהטוב – היינו רצון ה' – הוא לבדו אמת וקיים, והרע – היינו כל מה שהוא נגד רצון ית' – הריהו שקר ובטל.

has permanence. Evil is anything which contradicts God's Will, and is falsehood and nothingness.

Because God's Will is the only engine and source of reality – there is nothing else. How then could a creature want to do something that contradicts it? It is like he wants something that does not exist, as if he is pursuing a void and false vision. He chooses a vacuum over existence, and sends himself into oblivion...

Based on this we can understand that before Adam ate from the Tree, his choice to imbibe evil into his being was like the choice to jump into a fire. (See Morasha class on Gan Eden explaining Adam's motivation to eat from the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil). And after he ate, good and evil were now mixed up inside him so that he lost his initial clarity [and could no longer extricate himself from the situation to choose correctly].

The highest level of exercising one's free will is to realize that evil is total falsehood and has no intrinsic, independent existence [even though it appears to], until he is no longer drawn to it. Instead, he loves good alone.

כי הרי רצונו יתברך הוא המקיים את כל המציאות וזולתו אין, ואיך יתכן שנברא פשוט ירצא מה שנגד רצון ית' – הרי בזה הוא רוצה דבר שהוא נגד המציאות, ואין זה אלא שרוצה באין ואפס ודמיון שוא, ובוחר הוא באבדון ומאבד עצמו לדעת ...

וזה גם ביאור מה שכתב בנפש החיים הנ"ל שקודם החטא היתה הכניסה לרע כמו הכניסה לתוך האש, ושאחר החטא פסקה הבחנה בהירה זו, ונעשה תערוכת טוב ורע .

חלק א', דף קיז: אמנם יש מדרגה עוד גבוהה מזה; היינו שיכיר כל כך שהרע שקר הוא ואינו מציאות כלל, עד שלא יהיה לו שום רצון אליו, ויאהב את הטוב לבדו בכל לבבו.

The Talmud relates the following parable to describe the pursuit of perfect truthfulness in this world:

3. **Talmud Bavli (Babylonian Talmud), Sanhedrin 97a – The parable of the town named “Kushtah” (Truth) teaches that in this world it is appropriate to alter the truth for the sake of other Torah-defined goals such as modesty.**

Rava said, “In the beginning I used to think there is no truth in the world. One of the Rabbis told me – Rav Tavut was his name, and some say Rav Tavyomi was his name – that even if you had given him all the treasures in the world, he would never change his speech [i.e. alter the truth].

“One time he went to a place named Kushtah [the word *kushtah* means truth in Aramaic] wherein no one altered the truth and no one died an untimely death. He married a woman from there and they had two sons.

“One day his wife was sitting in her home washing her hair. A neighbor came knocking at the door. Reasoning that it was not appropriate [to

אמר רבא מריש הוה אמינא ליכא קושטא בעלמא אמר לי ההוא מרבנן ורב טבות שמיה ואמרי לה רב טביומי שמיה, דאי הווי יהבי ליה כל חללי דעלמא לא הוה משני בדבוריה.

זימנא חדא איקלעי לההוא אתרא וקושטא שמיה ולא הווי משני בדבוריהו ולא הווי מיית איניש מהתם בלא זימניה נסיבי איתתא מינהו והווי לי תרתין בנין מינה.

יומא חד הוה יתבא דביתהו וקא חייפא רישה אתאי שיבבתה טרפא אדשא סבר לאו אורח ארעא אמר לה ליתא הכא.

tell the neighbor she was bathing, and that therefore it is permitted to alter the truth for the sake of modesty] he told [the neighbor], ‘She’s not here.’

“[As a result] his two sons died. The people of the town came before him and said, ‘What happened?’ He related the incident to them. They said to him, ‘We ask a favor of you, that you leave the town and do not bring death amongst this people.’”

שכיבו ליה תרתין בנין. אתו אינשי דאתרא לקמיה
אמרו ליה מאי האי אמר להו הכי הוה מעשה א"ל
במטותא מינד פוק מאתרין ולא תגרי בהו מותנא בהנד
אינשי.

The Maharal explains that the place named *Kushtah* (meaning “truth” in Aramaic) does not really exist in this world. This means that perfect truthfulness – where both the message and the words are always accurate – is an impossible level that cannot be reached in this world, since the right thing to do is to alter the truth when it is appropriate (when pursuing peace, or a mitzvah, as described in Section IV).

Therefore, so long as Rav Tavut was a human living in this world, he could not inhabit the town called *Kushtah* where both the message and the words had to be accurate (Rabbi Yitzchak Berkovits, based on Maharal, *Netivot Olam*, *Netiv HaEmet*, Ch. 1, s.v. *ma’amar zeh*).

4. **Maharal, Chidushei Agadot, Sanhedrin 97a – Perfect truthfulness is a goal, even when there is a leniency to alter the truth. Truth is that which has permanence and continuity.**

One has to understand that the point of this passage [in source 3] is to teach the high value of truth, that all which follows truth is suitable for permanence and continuity, as the Sages said, “Truth stands, falsehood does not stand” (Shabbat 104a), for truth is fit for existence and falsehood is fit for emptiness.

ויש לדעת כי עיקר המאמר הזה בא להודיע על מעלת
האמת, שכל אשר נמשך אחר האמת שראוי אליו
הקיום, וכמו שאמרו חכמים (שבת ק"ד א') קושטא
קאי שקרא לא קאי, כי האמת ראוי אליו המציאות
והשקר ראוי אליו ההעדר.

The following example explains the statement, “Truth stands, falsehood does not stand” (in the above source). We all intuitively realize that waking life is relatively more real and true than a dream during sleep. Why is this? Because waking life has relative permanence and continuity – your room and bed are still there when you wake up, even though they disappeared while you were asleep. However, a dream lacks any permanence or continuity – when you go back to sleep, your room and bed on the Caribbean Island that you dreamed about previously, are gone. Therefore, it’s easy for us to sense that the events and objects of waking life are true, since they have relative permanence, whereas a dream which lacks any permanence and continuity is false. It could therefore be said that which is true “stands the test of time” (Rabbi Benzion Klatzko).

There is a deeper lesson behind the statement “Truth stands, falsehood does not stand”, as follows. There are 22 letters in the Hebrew alphabet. When the five “end letters” are written side by side with their counterparts there are 27 letters altogether. The first, middle and last letters in this sequence make up the word *emet*, “truth.” Each of these letters rests on two legs, so that they have a firm foundation. This teaches us that truth is built on a firm foundation and endures (based on Shabbat 104a).

א ב ג ד ה ו ז ח ט י כ ל מ נ ס ע פ צ ק ר ש ת

The last letters of the Aleph-Beit form the word *sheker*, meaning “falsehood.” Each of these letters stands on

one “leg,” that is they do not have a firm foundation. This comes to tell us that a lie has no foundation and does not endure.

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Furthermore, the first letters of the alphabet combine to form the word “bagad”, which means to betray:

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Comparing the placement of the letters for *emet* and the placement of the letters for *sheker* and *bagad*, one might say that truth is consistent throughout – at the beginning, middle, and end of a matter – whereas falsehood only makes its appearance at the beginning or end of a matter, but then is found to be non-existent and empty.

Finally, our Sages tell us that one has to “dig in the Torah” and one will find truth. As an example, the final letters of the first three words of the Torah (Bereishit/Genesis 1:1) are the mixed up letters of the word *emet* (truth). Dig a little deeper and the truth will be clearer: the final letters of the second through fourth words spells *emet* in order (Rabbi Avrohom Gershon):

בְּרֵאשִׁית בָּרָא אֱלֹקִים אֶת הַשָּׁמַיִם וְאֶת הָאָרֶץ.

5. **Maharsha, Sanhedrin 97a – *Emet*, Truth is the seal of God. One who does not alter his words upholds the seal of God and causes the Creation to be sustained. One who does alter his words, even where it is permitted, makes an impact on the Creation.**

Since the seal of the Holy One is *emet* [truth, Shabbat 55a], and through this seal the world is sustained ... therefore, one who changes one’s words destroys the seal. And even if one detracts or destroys a little, which is [symbolized by the loss of] the *aleph*, that which remains is the word *mait* (*mem, taf*). Alternatively, one who does not alter his words, sustains himself and his world through the seal of Creation which is *emet*, which means that no one will have an untimely end, for lying brings an untimely death.

כי חותמו של הקב"ה הוא אמת וכו קיים את העולם...
והרי המשנה בדבורו מהרס החותם וקיומו של עולם.
ואף אם מהרס ופוחת ממנו מספר המועט שהוא אל"ף,
נשאר "מת" ובהיפך מי שלא משנה בדבורו הוא מקיים
עצמו ועולמו בחותמו של הבריאה שהיא "אמת" והיינו
דלא מת איניש בלא זמניה, שהשקר מביא מיתה בלא
זמן.

6. **Pirkei Avot (Ethics of Our Fathers) 1:18 – The world is sustained by three things: truth, justice, and peace.**

Rabban Shimon ben Gamliel said, “The world is sustained by three things: justice, truth, and peace.”

רבן שמעון בן גמליאל אומר על שלשה דברים העולם
קים על הדין ועל האמת ועל השלום.

KEY THEMES OF SECTION II:

- ☞ Sometimes what appears to be *true* is *false* – for example, to “tell the truth” about another person if it would reveal something negative about him. Other times, it’s the opposite: what appears to be

false may help to achieve the *truth* – for example, to praise a bride to her groom when she may not possess the qualities you are describing. Nevertheless, even when there is a leniency to alter the truth, perfect truthfulness is a goal toward which everyone must strive.

- ☞ It certainly takes effort to think carefully before one speaks and acts to ensure that one is always truthful. However, when one does so, one is aligning one’s speech and actions with the Will of God and helping to sustain the world.

SECTION III. CATEGORIES OF FALSEHOOD THAT ARE PROHIBITED

In the previous section we discussed Judaism’s definition and profound relationship to that which we call “*truth*.” In this section we categorize different types of falsehood and give examples. The goal of this section is to sensitize ourselves to statements that we may never have previously considered falsehood.

PART A. SPOKEN FALSEHOOD: THE NINE CATEGORIES

There are nine categories of prohibited falsehood, which are listed below in descending severity (as described in Rabbeinu Yonah’s *Sha’arei Teshuvah* 3:178-186):

1. Rabbi Avrohom Ehrman, *Journey to Virtue*, 10:6 – Falsehood that causes a loss to another.

The *first* and most serious category encompasses any falsehood that causes injustice or loss to another person, such as disclaiming a debt of money or property, including wages owed to a worker. (This also violates the prohibition: “Do not deny [money] falsely,” *Vayikra* 19:11.)

Similarly, cheating in business is also prohibited by the Torah. (This also violates the command not to cause distress to others, *Vayikra* 25:14.)

An example of causing someone a loss by lying:

Reuven hired Shimon to do some work, and did not pay Shimon his wages.

Shimon: “*Did you mail my check yet?*”

Reuven: “*Sure, I sent it in the mail two months ago. Maybe you misplaced it.*”

Included in this category of falsehood would be a case where an employee lies to his boss saying that he is sick, in order that he can use his sick days for a vacation.

2. *Ibid.* 10:7 – Falsehood that indirectly causes a loss to another.

The *second* category encompasses falsehood that does not in itself cause direct harm or loss, but is intended to lead to it. For example:

A and B are executives in a large company. A is B’s boss. B, coveting A’s job, makes a point of treating A with a great show of respect and loyalty. A decides to entrust B with more responsibility. B then uses his position to cause several deals to fall through in a way that reflects badly on A, but leaves B looking

blameless. As a result, A is fired, and B is given his job.

Even though B's earlier respectful behavior toward A did not harm A directly, his behavior right from the start was prohibited under this category of falsehood. (In the above case there might be other transgressions involved as well, such as a theft.)

3. **Ibid. 10:8 – Falsehood that causes a loss of expected profit or gain.**

The *third* category encompasses situations in which one person deceitfully prevents another from realizing a certain profit or advantage and diverts it to himself, or deceives someone into giving him a present. This may not cause any actual loss, but it still deprives someone from expected benefit or profit.

Cheating on an entrance test to a job or a college that causes another person to lose a position or place, falls into this category of falsehood. If one does get the job by cheating, any money earned from it might be considered theft (Igrot Moshe, Choshen Mishpat 2:30). (Of course, even if no one else loses out, cheating on a test is outright falsehood.)

The following story indicates the thoughtfulness that one must employ to avoid causing a loss of profit to others.

Rabbi Aaron Soloveitchik (Rosh Yeshivah of Brisk in Chicago) was once traveling with his grandson to New York. When he went to the travel agent to buy the ticket, she told him that the airline could give him a companion ticket at a discounted price for a fellow family member. The agent insisted that his grandson would qualify as a companion for the discount. Rabbi Soloveitchik asked to see the terms of the offer and when he saw that this was not the case, and would cause a loss of profit to the airline, he paid full price for the ticket. (Heard from Rabbi Motty Friedman, the grandson-in-law of Rabbi Aaron Soloveitchik.)

4. **Ibid. 10:9 – Deliberately misrepresenting facts that do not harm others.**

The *fourth* category encompasses deliberately misrepresenting what one has heard, even though no personal benefit is gained from doing so and no one else is harmed. [This is commonly referred to as a “white lie.”]

Yaakov and Chezkie were telling friends about a camp outing. Yaakov started making up a story about a midnight intruder to their campfire. Chezkie interrupted him and said: “Stop making up stories. There was no midnight intruder.” Yaakov responded: “So what, they’ll never know!”

As we shall see below in section IV, this category of falsehood was made permissible by the Rabbis in order to:

1. fulfill a mitzvah, and
2. for the pursuit of “good and peace.”

5. **Ibid. 10:10 – Offering a favor or gift without intending to follow through.**

The *fifth* category encompasses offering to do a favor or give a gift without intending to do so. This is duplicity ... and we are commanded to speak only an honest “yes” or “no” and not to speak with hypocrisy (Bava Metzia 49a).

Child to parent: *I will do my homework right after I finish playing.*
(To himself: *I have no real intention of doing it then. At least I will put it off.*)

Wife to husband: *Please clean up this room while I go to the PTA meeting.*

Husband: *All right. (He has no intention of doing so, but it is more convenient not to make an issue out of it.)*

6. **Ibid. 10:11 – Backing out of a promise to do something for someone.**

Will be honored encompasses promising to do something with the intention of keeping one's word, and then deciding afterwards to renege on the promise ... There are three ways in which one's word can be considered a "promise":

1. If the word "promise" is used;
2. If the word given is for so small a favor that the recipient has no reason to doubt that it will not be kept;
3. If one gives his word in a public setting, since people assume that such a commitment will be honored.

Word must be kept:

1. *"I promise to take you to see ..."*
2. *"I will take you home." (A five-minute drive.)*
3. *At a public meeting: "I will work on setting up a committee."*

Someone who pledges to donate money to *tzedakah* (charity) and does not keep his word commits the sin of falsehood and also violates the prohibition of profaning one's vow (Bamidbar/Numbers 30:3), since a pledge to *tzedakah* has the force of a vow.

7. **Ibid. 10:13 – Pretending to do someone a favor, especially if they now feel a debt of gratitude to you.**

The *seventh* category encompasses indicating [or pretending] that one has done someone a favor or spoken well of him, when one has not actually done so [this is called *geneivat da'at*, lit. theft of the mind; Shulchan Aruch, Choshen Mishpat 228:6].

Reuven meets Shimon on the road and thinks that Shimon came out especially to greet him. Shimon, who had no intention of coming to greet Reuven, takes advantage of the situation and says, "I came especially to greet you, Reuven!"

Wrong way: You're my good friend; I am going to give you a special price. (The item is on sale already.)

Right way: You're my good friend; I'm happy you came when the item is on sale.

8. **Ibid. 10:14 – Praising oneself or accepting praise for qualities that one does not have.**

The *eighth* category consists of praising oneself or accepting praise from others for good deeds or qualities one does not possess.

"Stand up for Reb David. He has completed the Talmud." (If he only learned 70% of the Talmud, he is required to say, "I have not yet learned all of it.")

9. **Ibid. 10:15 – Minor lies for one's own convenience when no one else is affected.**

The *ninth* category covers the kinds of falsehood that people say for their own pleasure or convenience. Such falsehood does not cause any loss to anyone, and it does not indicate a total lack

of sensitivity to the value of truth (as in the fourth category), but is still forbidden.

Mother: *What time did you go to sleep last night?*

Child: *Uh, 10:00. (He really went to sleep at 11:00.)*

KEY THEMES OF SECTION III, PART A:

☞ To the untrained, it's either red wine or white wine. But to a wine connoisseur there are many categories to describe wine. Similarly, to those lacking sensitivity it's either a "small lie" or a "big lie." But to Jews who are connoisseurs of the truth, there are nine categories of falsehood! In descending order of severity they are:

1. A falsehood that causes a *direct loss* to others
2. A falsehood that causes an *indirect loss* to others
3. A falsehood that causes a loss of expected profit
4. A deliberate inconsequential falsehood
5. Offering a favor with no intent to fulfill it
6. Backing out of a promise to do a favor
7. Pretending to do a favor
8. Accepting praise for qualities one does not have
9. Convenient inconsequential falsehood

☞ The more categories a culture has to describe something, the more sensitized one is to it. Can any other people or culture claim to have nine categories of truthfulness?

PART B. FALSEHOOD THROUGH BODY LANGUAGE AND SILENCE

The following sources show that falsehood is not only determined by what you say, but also by the accuracy of the *message* that others understand from your actions.

1. Rabbi Avrohom Ehrman, *Journey to Virtue*, 10:4

Falsehood is prohibited whether spoken out loud or conveyed through facial expressions, gestures, body language, etc.

An example of the above:

A friend is selling his apartment. When a prospective buyer comes to see the apartment he arranges that his friends be in the apartment and appear wealthy as if they're interested in buying it. This is falsehood, even though they remain silent. (Heard from Rabbi Yitzchak Berkovits, Jerusalem.)

2. Talmud Bavli, Shavuot 31a – Remaining silent could be falsehood if it gives the wrong message or results in an injustice.

From where [do we know] that if a student is sitting before his teacher [who is the judge in Beit Din], and [the student] sees a supporting argument for the poor litigant, or an argument against the rich litigant [that his teacher missed] – he may not sit quietly? The Torah states, "Distance yourself from falsehood" (Shemot 23:7).

מגין לתלמיד שיושב לפני רבו ורואה זכות לעני וחוב לעשיר, מגין שלא ישתוק? תלמוד לומר: מדבר שקר תרחק ...

An example of falsehood without speaking:

“Here is David, he just finished learning about when it is permissible to lie.” (If he hasn’t learned this topic, then by remaining silent he is telling a lie.)

Additionally, the Talmud (Shavuot 31a) cites cases where one’s *style of dress could lead to falsehood* in a court of law, since it might lead the judges to respect the wealthy-looking party or have pity on the poor-looking party.

PART C. LISTENING TO FALSEHOOD IS PROHIBITED

One last aspect of the mitzvah to “distance oneself from falsehood” is not to deliberately listen to something that is a lie:

1. **Sefer HaChinuch, Mitzvah #74 – Included in the mitzvah to “distance yourself” from falsehood: do not incline your ear to listen to falsehood.**

An aspect of “distancing” is not to incline one’s ear at all to [hear] anything that one believes to be falsehood, even if [the listeners] do not know for certain that this particular matter is a lie ...

ומצד הריחוק הזהירתנו שלא נטה אוזננו כלל לשום דבר שנחשוב שהוא שקר, ואף על פי שאין אנו יודעין בבריא שיהא אותו הדבר שקר ...

2. **Talmud Bavli, Shavuot 30b – Listening to words of falsehood that may jeopardize one’s sense of right and wrong is prohibited.**

From where do we know that a judge may not have an unlearned apprentice sit with him [to discuss the case on trial, if the student may cause the judge to make an error]? The Torah states, “Distance yourself from falsehood.”

מונין לדיין שלא ישב תלמיד בור לפניו? ת”ל: מדבר שקר תרחק.

PART D. NORMAL EXAGGERATION IS NOT FALSEHOOD

1. **Rabbi Avrohom Ehrman, Journey to Virtue, 10:24 – A blatant exaggeration is not a distortion of the truth since everyone understands that you are just exaggerating.**

The prohibitions against falsehood do not apply to blatant exaggerations that are obvious to the listener (based on Mishnah Nedarim 24b, Ran *ibid.*).

“He is as tall as a skyscraper.”
“The entire city came to the wedding.”

Therefore, one needs to consider the normal use of language in a particular place and time in order to judge whether an exaggerated or inaccurate statement presents a false message or is just the normal way to speak (Rabbi Yitzchak Berkovits, *Hilchot Bein Adam L’Chavero* (Center for Jewish Values) Vol. I, 1:17-18).

KEY THEMES OF SECTION III, PARTS B-D:

☞ Falsehood is not only determined by what you say, but also by the accuracy of the *message* that

others understand from your words and actions, even if you don't say anything misleading. Therefore, in assessing how truthful we are, we need to consider the truthfulness of our non-verbal communication: facial expressions, body language, and even silence!

- ☞ Our rejection of falsehood must be so complete that we do not even *listen* to words of falsehood, especially where they could jeopardize our own sense of honesty.
- ☞ Finally, since falsehood is determined by the message that others understand from your words, if everyone understands that you are exaggerating for effect, then it's not falsehood, even though the words are not accurate.

SECTION IV. CASES OF PERMITTED INCONSEQUENTIAL FALSEHOOD

In certain situations the Torah allows for an altering of the truth to allow for a more important Torah-defined goal. However, only an inconsequential falsehood that does not harm anyone else, nor lead to personal gain (the fourth category in Section III above) is permitted in such a case. (Furthermore, this leniency is subject to the conditions listed in Section V.)

PART A. FOR THE SAKE OF FULFILLING A MITZVAH

1. **Rabbeinu Yonah, Sha'arei Teshuvah 3:181 – Inconsequential falsehood is permitted for the sake of fulfilling a mitzvah and the pursuit of good.**

[Rabbeinu Yonah defines nine categories of falsehood.] The fourth category is: one who intentionally lies in relating a story that he heard and changes [the facts] around a little. He has no benefit from his lies, and it does not damage anyone else...

This category of falsehood was made permissible [by the Rabbis] to:

1. fulfill a mitzvah; and
2. for the pursuit of good and peace.

החלק הרביעי - המשקר בספור הדברים אשר שמע ומחליף קצתם במתכוין, ואין לו תועלת בשקריו ולא הפסד לזולתו ..

וזה החלק התיירוהו לקיים מצות ודרישת טובה ושלו.

For example:

It is permissible to make up a completely fictional story to improve the mood of a friend who is in the hospital. For example, it is permitted to make up a funny story about how you got lost on the way to visit him, if this will make him happy. (Improving the mood of the patient is part of the mitzvah of visiting the sick.)

PART B. FOR THE SAKE OF PEACE

1. **Talmud Bavli, Yevamot 65b – For the sake of peace between a husband and wife, it is permitted to alter the truth.**

[Avraham (Abraham) and Sarah were informed

by three guests that they would miraculously have children even though they were old. Sarah expressed disbelief at the news, claiming that both she and her husband were incapable of producing children. When God related the incident of Sarah's disbelief to Avraham, He omitted the fact that Sarah had implied that her husband was old and incapable of having children:]

The School of Rabbi Yishmael taught in a Baraita: Great is peace, for even The Holy One, Blessed is He, alters [words] for its sake. Originally, it is written, “[Sarah said: after I have withered and become old shall I again have delicate skin and give birth?!] And my husband is old!” but in the end [when God quotes Sarah's words to Avraham] it is written, “and I [Sarah] am old” (Bereishit 18:12-13).

דבי רבי ישמעאל תנא: גדול השלום, שאף הקדוש ברוך הוא שינה בו, דמעיקרא כתיב: ואדוני זקן, ולבסוף כתיב: ואני זקנתי.

It is also permitted to alter the truth to bring peace between any two parties in a dispute (Yevamot 65b gives the example of Yosef (Joseph) and his brothers). Also, Aaron would inform each party in a dispute that the other felt bad and wanted to resolve the issue, until they would meet on the street and embrace (Pirkei Avot 1:12).

The following beautiful story shows how a creative altering of the truth saved a spouse from embarrassment:

Dinah and Reuven were getting married, and Reuven's grandmother bought a large diamond to be Dinah's engagement ring. At the first night of Sheva Berachot (festive meals following the wedding), Dinah was shocked to find the ring missing. She became the subject of snide and insensitive comments for the next few months, until one afternoon when Reuven put on his wedding suit for that night's Pesach Seder and found the ring. "I forgot that I put it in my pocket when Dinah went to wash for the bread meal at Shevah Berachot," he said. Reuven then became the subject of comments about his forgetfulness and Dinah was exonerated.

Eighteen years later, Reuven and Dinah encountered serious financial difficulties and decided to sell the ring to help pay for their daughter's upcoming wedding. When Dinah took the ring to the original store to have it valued, the owner insisted that he'd never sold such a ring. Only after going home and looking at the eighteen-year-old receipt did Dinah realize that Reuven had bought a replacement for the lost ring shortly after the wedding and claimed that he was the one who had forgotten it in his pocket – all to save her from embarrassment and keep peace in the family! (Adapted from People Speak by Rabbi Walder.)

PART C. TO PRAISE A BRIDE TO HER GROOM

1. Talmud Bavli, Ketubot 16b-17a – To praise a bride to her groom, it is permitted to alter the truth.

The Rabbis taught in a Baraita: How do we dance before the bride? [How do we praise the bride to the groom?].

תנו רבנן: כיצד מורקדין לפני הכלה?

Beit Shammai says, “[We praise and describe] the bride as she is.”

But Beit Hillel says, “[In all cases we give praise and say] that the bride is pleasant and kind.”

Beit Shammai said to Beit Hillel, “Now, if she were lame or blind do we say about her that she is a beautiful and charming bride? But the Torah has said: ‘Distance yourself from falsehood!’”

Beit Hillel said to Beit Shammai, “According to your view, if someone made a bad purchase in the market [and he asked your opinion on the purchase, and he had no way of returning the item] should one praise it in the purchaser’s eyes or denigrate it? Of course you would say that one should praise it in his eyes. [We should therefore praise even a homely bride].”

בית שמאי אומרים: כלה כמות שהיא,

ובית הלל אומרים: כלה נאה וחסודה.

אמרו להן ב"ש לב"ה: הרי שהיתה חיגרת או סומא, אומר' 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.

An example of the above:

Following a Jewish wedding, there is a week of festive meals for the bride and groom (Shevah Berachot) at which it is customary for family and friends to praise the bride and groom in front of each other. It is permitted to stretch the truth and exaggerate so that they will be more beloved to each other (Shulchan Aruch, Even Ha'Ezer 65:1) .

An example of improperly criticizing a completed purchase (from Journey to Virtue, Rabbi Avrohom Ehrman, 26:14)

A: *Look at my new suit.*

B: *How much did you pay?*

A: *X dollars.*

B: *What! You were cheated!*

[B should have considered that perhaps the market price changed or that A cannot return the purchase, in which case nothing but disappointment is gained by telling him he was overcharged. Rather he should say, “Looks like a very nice suit,” until he finds out if A could return it.]

PART D. HUMILITY, MODESTY, AND PROTECTING OTHERS FROM HARM

1. **Talmud Bavli, Bava Metzia 23b; Rashi, ibid. – For the sake of acting with humility, or being discrete about one’s private life or to protect another from harm, it is permitted to alter the truth.**

Rav Yehudah said in the name of Shmuel, “In only these three matters is it the practice of the Rabbis to deviate in their speech [from the truth: in regard to knowledge of] a tractate, [matters of] the bed, and hospitality.”

Rashi:

[In regard to knowledge of] a tractate – someone asks you, “Do you know Masechet so-and-so very

דאמר רב יהודה אמר שמואל: בהני תלת מיילי עבידי רבנן דמשנו במלייהו: במסכת, ובפוריא, ובאושפיזא.

רש"י

במסכת. יש בידך מסכת פלוני סדורה בגירסא או לאו ואע"ג שסדורה היא לו יאמר לו לאו ומדת ענוה היא.

well or not?" Answer him, "No." This is the character trait of humility.

[In regard to matters of] the bed [i.e. modesty] – someone asks you whether you had relations with your spouse. Answer him, "No." This is the character trait of modesty.

[In regard to] hospitality – people ask you whether your host treated you well. Answer them, "No." This is a good character trait to prevent undesirable guests from returning repeatedly, inundating the host and ultimately exhausting his resources. [Note: this is not a case of *lashon hara*, prohibited derogatory information, since one is protecting the host from harmful, undesirable guests, Tosafot, *ibid.*, s.v. *b'ushpizah*.]

דאמר רב יהודה אמר שמואל: בהני תלת מיילי עבידי רבנן דמשנו במלייהו: במסכת, ובפוריא, ובאושפיזא.

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במסכת. יש בידך מסכת פלוני סדורה בגירסא או לאו ואע"ג שסדורה היא לו יאמר לו לאו ומדת ענוה היא.

בפוריא. שימשת מטתך יאמר לאו מדת צניעות הוא. באושפיזא. שאלוהו על אושפיזו אם קבלו בסבר פנים יפות ואמר לאו מדה טובה היא כדי שלא יקפצו בו בני אדם שאינן מהוגנין לבא תמיד עליו ויכלו את ממונו.

An example of altering the truth for humility:

A: *I heard that you're an expert in the laws of truth and falsehood!*

B: *I've learnt some of the laws but not all (even though B is really an expert).*

An example of altering the truth for modesty:

A: *Why were you late to work this morning?*

B: *I had to take care of some paperwork at the bank (even though in truth, he was at home caring for his pregnant wife who was not feeling well).*

Does this mean that a devious means (lying) can be justified by a noble end (pursuing peace or a mitzvah)?

The real meaning of this leniency is that in certain Torah-mandated situations (for example, the pursuit of peace), an alteration of the truth is not considered a deviation from *emet* (the Torah concept of truth), but rather is an expression of *emet* as defined by Divine wisdom. When the requirement to speak accurately is correctly balanced against other Torah ideals, such as the pursuit of peace, and avoiding damage to others, the result is *emet*. But outside of these Torah-mandated situations such an alteration of the truth would be considered falsehood (Rabbi Yitzchak Berkovits, *The Torah's Guidelines for Interpersonal Relationships Vol. I – Truth and Falsehood* (Center for Jewish Values), Ch. 1.)

The following story is an example of altering the truth to save another from harm:

This story involves Rabbi Yitzchak Elchonon Spektor (1817-1896), the beloved rav of Kovno, who was known for his great love and concern for fellow Jews.

In a small town far away from Kovno, a local rav had erred in a ruling he had made to a religious question posed to him. Though not everyone realized his mistake, two devious and conniving individuals knew that their rav had blundered badly, since the Shach (a commentary on the Shulchan Aruch) discussed the very same case.

Seeking to humiliate their rav, the two miscreants sent a letter to Rav Spektor, in which they posed the same question. They knew he would rule in accord with the Shach, and then they would show the letter to the community at large to disgrace their rav.

When Rav Spektor received the letter he wondered why these two individuals from a distant town – who had never sent him a letter before – were asking him a question their local rav could answer? He investigated and learned that these men were exceptionally argumentative and had a history of causing trouble in the community.

He suspected at once that the two men were contemplating a plot to embarrass their rav, and he sought to foil it. First he sent a letter to the two men with the wrong answer to the question, ruling exactly as their rav had ruled. Then, the very next day, he sent them a telegram which would arrive before the letter, saying that he had erred in his written ruling and that they should disregard the letter with the wrong ruling that would soon be coming.

Thus the mischievous twosome would not be able to use either the letter or the telegram to defame their rav, for the letter agreed with the rav and the telegram clearly indicated that even the great and sainted Rav Spektor had erred in this matter – just as their rav had. (Adapted from Rabbi Paysach Krohn, *The Maggid Speaks*, p. 63-65.)

PART E. DEALING WITH A LIAR OR EXTORTIONIST

1. **Mishnah, Nedarim 27b – To protect oneself, it is permissible to lie to an extortionist who is trying to illegitimately take one's money or property.**

One may declare a vow to murderers and to plunderers and to [self-appointed] tax collectors, [to support his claim] that it [the produce they seek to seize from him] is *terumah* [and hence forbidden to a non-Kohen], even though [in truth] it is not *terumah*, [or] that [the properties they seek to seize] belong to the king, even though they do not [in fact] belong to the king.

נודרין להרגין ולחרמין ולמוכסין, שהיא תרומה - אע"פ שאינו תרומה, שהן של בית המלך - אע"פ שאינו של בית המלך.

After seeing the above Mishnah, we have the question: why it is permissible to lie to a liar or extortionist? Is this not a lie that has an adverse effect on someone else (i.e. the extortionist), which is prohibited? In the next source we see the justification for using counter-deception against a liar or extortionist.

2. **Rabbi Yaakov Kamenetsky, Sefer Emes L'Ya'akov (Bereishit 27:12) – Deceiving a fraud is considered a preservation of the truth. Since the fraud is trying to take something that is not rightfully his, one is preserving the truthful state of affairs by *not* giving him the object he is trying to extort.**

We learn [from Yaakov's deception of his brother Eisav] an important fundamental in the nature of "truth." In Bereishit 27:35, [Yitzchak says to Eisav,] "Your brother came with trickery and took your blessing." Onkelos translates "he came with trickery" as "he came with wisdom." The meaning behind Onkelos' choice of translation is that even the truth must be expressed according to a wise accounting of the situation. As an example, [consider the following case:] Reuven is being chased by an attacker and hides in Shimon's home. When the attacker comes asking for Reuven, Shimon says that Reuven is hiding in his house, because he does not want to lie. Is this called truth?

באמת למדנו מכאן יסוד גדול במהות ה"אמת", דהנה דהלן [פל"ה] על הפסוק בא אחיך במרמה וגו' תרגם אונקלוס: "בחכמתא". וביאור הדבר הוא, שגם האמת צריכה שתתאמר לפי חשבון, שהרי למשל אם ראובן הנרדף מתחבא אצל שמעון, וכשהרודף מחפשו אומר שמעון לרודף שראובן מתחבא אצלו ומשום שאינו רוצה לשקר, הכי זה "אמת" יקרא?

Rather, on occasion it is certainly permitted for a person to use deceptive means to achieve his ends, according to the principle [“With the pure You act purely and] with the crooked You act crookedly” (Tehillim/Psalms 18:27). For example, if one is involved in daily interactions with a dangerous fraud – someone of Eisav’s type – sometimes there may be no alternative other than using deceptive and evasive means.

אלא ודאי שלפעמים מותר לאדם להשתמש בדרך הערמה כדי להשיג את מבוקשו, והיינו לפי הכלל של “ועם עקש תתפתל” [תהלים י”ח פכ”ז], דכשהוא בא לידי התמודדות עם רמאי מסוכן מסוגו של עשו, לפעמים אין מנוס מהשימוש בדרך הערמה והשתמטות.

According to the above source, it turns out that Rachav who altered the truth when asked for the whereabouts of the two spies (Yehoshua 2:1-24, see story at the beginning of this class) *was in fact telling the truth*, and there would be no need for *teshuvah* (correction of one’s character and actions) afterwards.

KEY THEMES OF SECTION IV:

- ☞ In certain Torah-mandated situations (for example, the pursuit of peace), an alteration of the truth is not considered a deviation from *emet* (the Torah concept of truth), but rather is an expression of *emet* as defined by Divine wisdom.
- ☞ Therefore, for the sake of the following Torah-defined goals, an inconsequential falsehood (which doesn’t affect anyone else negatively and subject to the conditions in Section V) is permitted:
 1. for the sake of fulfilling a mitzvah;
 2. for the sake of peace;
 3. for the sake of marital harmony and endearing a bride to her groom;
 4. for the sake of humility;
 5. for the sake of modesty regarding the private matters between a husband and wife;
 6. to protect oneself and others from harm.
- ☞ When the requirement to speak accurately is correctly balanced against the Torah ideals above the result is *emet*. But outside of these Torah-mandated situations such an alteration of the truth would be considered falsehood.

SECTION V. CONDITIONS FOR PERMITTED FALSEHOOD

PART A. IT MUST BE AN INCONSEQUENTIAL ALTERING OF THE TRUTH

As was seen in Section IV, only an inconsequential falsehood where no one else is negatively affected is permitted in order to fulfill a mitzvah or pursue peace.

If the lie affects anyone else adversely then it is prohibited even for the sake of a mitzvah or pursuing peace (Rabbeinu Yonah, Shaarei Teshuvah 3:179, fourth category).

PART B. IF THERE IS ANOTHER MEANS, ONE SHOULD NOT ALTER THE TRUTH**1. Orchos Tzadikim, end of Sha'ar 22 – Even where it is permitted to alter the truth, one should try to use another means or minimize the falsehood.**

In all these situations where the Sages permitted one to alter [the truth], if one could achieve the same ends without lying, that would be better. For example, if they asked him “Do you know Masechet so-and-so?” [and out of humility he does not want to admit that he does indeed know it,] he should respond, “Do you really think that I know it?”

And if one can avoid answering the questioner in a way that he will not have to lie [for example, by changing the topic], then this is very good.

ובכל אלו שהתירו חכמים לשנות, אם יכול לעשות
שלא ישקר, הוא טוב יותר ממה שישקר, כגון אם
שואליו לוי: יודע אתה מסכתא פלונית? ישיב: וכי אתה
סבור שאני יודע?

ואם יוכל לסלק השואל בענין שלא ישקר, הוא טוב
מאד.

Altering the truth for any of the purposes described in Section IV is permitted only if there is no other way to achieve the desired result (such as in the cases of protecting property or instilling peace) (Journey to Virtue, Rabbi Avrohom Ehrman, 10:21)

PART C. AN ADULT MAY NOT ALTER THE TRUTH REGULARLY, AND A CHILD MAY NOT DO SO AT ALL.**1. Yam Shel Shlomo, Yevamot 6:46 – Even in a situation where altering the truth is permitted, one may not do so on a regular basis.**

Now it would seem that this only applies in non-recurring situations. But [in the case of a son acting as a] messenger between his mother and father [on a constant basis], he may not lie, even if he does so for the sake of peace [between the husband and wife].

ונראה, דוקא דבר שהוא באקראי, אבל שליחות שהוא
בין אביו לאמו לא ישנה, אפי' במשנה משום שלום

Even in a case where an adult is permitted to alter the truth, the Sages prohibited children from doing so. This is in order to avoid children developing a negative habit of speaking falsehood (Rabbi Yitzchak Berkovits based on Rashi, Yevamot 63a, s.v. *aval atah*).

The following story highlights the keen sense of honesty that even a child can have:

There was once a young boy who got on a bus in Israel, and showed his bus card to the driver to have it punched. In the tumult of all the other passengers streaming past, the driver mistakenly thought that he'd punched the card. "I already punched your card!" he said and insisted that the boy go and find a seat.

As the boy reluctantly walked down the aisle, he started to cry. To his consternation the bus driver stopped the bus, walked to the back of the bus and asked the boy what was wrong. "It's not true. I didn't pay," he cried, "it's not true." The driver smiled, graciously punched the card and the record was set straight. (Adapted from The Maggid Speaks series by Rabbi Paysach Krohn.)

PART D. ONE MAY NOT ALTER TORAH LAW**1. Yam Shel Shlomo, Bava Kama 4:9 – Lying about the details of a Torah law is prohibited even in a case of danger.**

We also learn from this Baraita [Bava Kama 38a, where the Sages taught certain Jewish laws to the Romans that may have put their lives in danger] that it is prohibited to alter words of Torah [i.e. lie about what is stated in the Torah] even in a case of danger.

גם שמעינן מהאי ברייתא דאסור לשנות דברי תורה,
אף כי הסכנה

Even though altering the truth is permitted for any of the above purposes (as described in Section IV), it is prohibited to lie regarding the contents of Torah law, even if there is danger involved in revealing the information truthfully.

The Talmud (Megillah 9a) records how King Ptolmey of Egypt (c. 300 BCE) forced seventy-two Torah scholars to translate the Torah into Greek. Even though these Sages were placed in separate cubicles, they independently wrote the same translation, including where they deliberately altered the accuracy of the translation of the original Hebrew. For example, “Let *us* make man in *our* form” (Bereishit 1:26) referring to God’s creation of man, was translated as “Let *Me* make man in *My* form.” The switch from plural to singular was to prevent people thinking that there is more than one God (Megillah 9a, Rashi s.v. *e’aseh adam*). In this case, since they were not lying about the details of Torah *law*, but rather altering the details of the *narrative* to prevent mistaken ideologies, it was permitted.

KEY THEMES OF SECTION V:

☞ One may only alter the truth for a Torah-defined goal (as listed in Section IV) if *all* following conditions are met:

1. It must be an inconsequential altering of the truth where no one else is negatively affected
2. There must be no other means available
3. It may not be done regularly (and a child may not alter the truth at all since he may lack the sensitivity to know when it is permissible and when not)
4. One may not lie about Torah law.