

## The Truth, and Nothing but the Truth!

“מְדַבֵּר שְׂקֵר תִּרְעָק”

The Torah’s treatment of the topic of speaking truthfully is exquisitely sensitive. The mitzvah to “distance oneself 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 session 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?!**

## 1 – THE BASIC SOURCES: THE WRITTEN & ORAL TORAH

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

“Distance yourself from falsehood”	"מדבר שקר תרחק"
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What is meant by the phrase “*distance* yourself from falsehood”? Why does the Torah not just say “don’t lie”? The classic sources deal with this question both from a technical (*halachic*) and conceptual (*hashkafic*) perspective:

### Source 2. Shavuos 30b – No deviation from truth, whatsoever, in the courtroom

<p>What is the source for the following halacha: a student, whose Rabbi tells him “Listen, you know about me that if they’d offer me a million dollars, I wouldn’t lie. Now, I’ve got a \$100 loan with so-&amp;-so, but I’ve only got one witness to prove it...”, from where do we know that the student should not join in as the mock 2<sup>nd</sup>-witness? For it says in the verse “<i>Distance yourself from falsehood</i>”.</p> <p>[Question] You’re prohibiting that from “distance yourself from falsehood”!? It’s a flat-out lie, and the Torah already taught us “<i>Don’t afflict your brother with a false witness</i>”(Shemos 20:12)!!</p> <p>[Answer] Rather, if the teacher tells the student “I’ve got one witness, you just show up, and don’t say anything, and that way no false words will be coming out of your mouth”, even still, this is prohibited, as it says in the verse “<i>Distance yourself from falsehood</i>”.</p>	<p style="text-align: right;">מנין לתלמיד שאמר לו רבו יודע אתה בי שאם נותנין לי מאה מנה איני מבדה מנה יש לי אצל פלוני ואין לי עליו אלא עד אחד מנין שלא יצטרף עמו תלמוד לומר מדבר שקר תרחק</p> <p style="text-align: right;">האי מדבר שקר תרחק נפקא הא ודאי שקורי קא משקר ורחמנא אמר (שמות כ, יב) לא תענה ברעך עד שקר</p> <p style="text-align: right;">אלא כגון דאמר ליה ודאי חד סהדא אית לי ותא אתה קום התם ולא תימא ולא מידי דהא לא מפקת מפומך שקרא אפי' הכי אסור משום שנאמר מדבר שקר תרחק</p>
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This Gemara provides us with an example<sup>1</sup> of a situation in which one could certainly have thought that ‘bending the truth’ a bit may be justified, in order to accomplish a ‘greater truth’. Don’t the ends justify the means sometimes? To contradict this line of reasoning, the Torah teaches us: “No! Stay far away from *anything* which contains even the smallest elements of falsehood, even if, in the larger picture, it would seem justified.”

Not only is out-right lying not allowed, but even misrepresenting the truth is prohibited from the additional wording of “מדבר שקר תרחק”.<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> This is in fact only 1 of 13 scenarios in the Gemara in Shavuos 30b in which “מדבר שקר תרחק” forbids various forms of conduct in Beis Din such as this. For poignancy, as well as brevity’s sake, this particular example was selected.

<sup>2</sup> R’ Yitzchak Berkowitz *shlita* points out the flip-side of this turns out to be a leniency: where one speaks words which are not literally true, but his overall message which is conveyed is easily understood, this would not be a violation of “lying”. This is otherwise known as ‘exaggerating’ ☺

From a *conceptual* perspective, the Sefer HaChinuch offers us the following insights:

**Source 3. 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.**

<p>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...</p> <p>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</p> <p>For this reason the Torah cautions us to distance ourselves exceedingly from falsehood, as it is written: “Distance yourself from falsehood” (Shemos 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].</p>	<p>שורש המצוה ידוע, כי השקר נתעב ונאלח בעיני הכל, אין דבר מאוס ממנו...</p> <p>ואין הברכה מצויה וחלה אלא במתדמים אליו במעשיהם, להיותם אמיתיים כמו שהוא אל אמת, ולהיותם מרחמים כמו שידוע שהוא רחום, ולהיותם גומלי חסדים כמו שהוא רב החסד...</p> <p>ועל כן הזהירנו התורה להרחיק מן השקר הרבה, כמו שכתוב מדבר שקר תרחק, והנה הזכירה בו לשון ריחוק לרוב מיאוסו מה שלא הזכירה כן בכל שאר האזהרות...</p>
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The signature of G-d is truth [Shabbos 55a]. Anything ‘false’ is intrinsically distant from Him (*See more about this in section 4, below*). In so far as the fundamental purpose of our having been created and placed in to this world, but for a few short years, is to maximize our time to grow and become similar to the Almighty, we’re cautioned to distance ourselves from falsehood. By doing so, we develop ourselves in to people of truth, resembling the Creator Himself.

However...

There are a number of very glaring exceptions in which lying is allowed. The upcoming sources will certainly force us to reassess – and expand – our definition of ‘truth’ and ‘falsehood’.

## 2 – GLARING EXCEPTIONS OF ‘LYING’

**Source 4. 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.**

<p>Rav Yehudah said in the name of Shmuel, “In 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.”</p> <p><b>Rashi:</b>  <i>[In regard to knowledge of] a tractate</i> – someone asks you, “Do you know Masechet so-and-so very well or not?” Answer him, “No.” This is the character trait of humility.</p> <p><i>[In regard to matters of] the bed</i> – someone asks you whether you had relations with your spouse. Answer him, “No.” This is the character trait of modesty.</p> <p><i>[In regard to] hospitality</i> – 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.<sup>3</sup></p>	<p>דאמר רב יהודה אמר שמואל: בהני תלת מילי עבידי רבנן דמשנו במלייהו: במסכת, ובפוריא, ובאושפיזא.</p> <p style="text-align: right;"><b>רש"י</b></p> <p>במסכת. יש בידך מסכת פלוני סדורה בגירסא או לאו ואע"ג שסדורה היא לו יאמר לו לאו ומדת ענוה היא.</p> <p>בפוריא. שימשת מטתך יאמר לאו מדת צניעות הוא.</p> <p>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.</p>
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→ Values often conflict. This Gemara teaches us that where there is a conflict of values between peace, humility, modesty, or causing harm to others on the one hand, versus compromising truth on the other hand, the prior take precedence.

**Source 5. Talmud Bavli, Yevamos 65b – For the sake of peace between a husband and wife, it is permitted to alter the truth.**

<p>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<sup>4</sup>, “[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).</p>	<p>דבי רבי ישמעאל תנא: גדול השלום, שאף הקדוש ברוך הוא שינה בו, דמעיקרא כתיב: ואדוני זקן, ולבסוף כתיב: ואני זקנתי.</p>
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<sup>3</sup> 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*]

<sup>4</sup> Avraham 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.

No less than the Almighty Himself “lied”, in order to not cause the slightest degree of marital-strife between Avraham and Sarah.

→ In a conflict of values between peace versus truth, peace wins.

**Source 6. Talmud Bavli, Kesubos 16b-17a – To praise a bride to her groom, it is permitted to alter the truth.**

<p>The Rabbis taught in a Baraisa: How do we dance before the bride? [How do we praise the bride to the groom?].</p> <p>Beis Shammai says, “[We praise and describe] the bride as she is.”</p> <p>But Beis Hillel says, “[In all cases we give praise and say] that the bride is pleasant and kind.”</p> <p>Beis Shammai said to Beis 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: <i>‘Distance yourself from falsehood!’</i>”</p> <p>Beis Hillel said to Beis 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.”</p>	<p>תנו רבנן: כיצד מרקדין לפני הכלה? 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 יגננו בעיניו? הוי אומר: ישבחנו בעיניו.<sup>5</sup></p>
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→ Once again, we see peace (in this context, not making someone else feel bad about a purchase or a wife!) trumps truth.

**QUESTION:** What happened to not lying!?!  
(Many of these examples certainly seem to be reasonable and understandable, but how do we resolve them with the Torah’s previously established emphasis on distancing oneself from anything even resembling falsehood??)

*What do you think??*

<sup>5</sup> וב"ש סברי אע"ג דישבחנו בעיניו אין להם לחכמים לתקן להזקיף לומר שקר דהתורה אמרה מדבר שקר תרחק. תוס'.

### 3 – EXPANDING OUR UNDERSTANDING OF “TRUTH”

**Source 7. 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 that which is ultimately true.

***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.***

In this classic essay, R’ Dessler explains a profound concept: What defines ‘true’ and ‘false’ is nothing less than what is the will (“רצון”) of the Creator. In other words, what is *ultimately* true (with a capital “U”!).

Let’s develop this idea.

Chazal add the following fascinating insights:

## 4 – TRUTH STANDS

### Source 8. Talmud Bavli, Shabbos 104a

<p><i>Shin</i>: Falsehood [<i>sheker</i>]. <i>Tav</i>: Truth [<i>emes</i>].          Why are the letters of the word <i>sheker</i> adjacent to one another in the alphabet, while the letters of <i>emes</i> are distant from one another? That is because while falsehood is easily found, truth is found only with great difficulty. And why do the letters that comprise the word <i>sheker</i> all stand on one foot, and the letters that comprise the word <i>emes</i> stand on bases that are wide like bricks? Because the truth stands eternal and falsehood does not stand eternal.</p>	<p>שי"ן שקר תי"ו אמת מאי טעמא שקר          מקרבן מיליה אמת מרחקא מיליה          שיקרא שכיח קושטא לא שכיח ומ"ט          שיקרא אחדא כרעיה קאי ואמת מלבן          לבוניה קושטא קאי שיקרא לא קאי</p>
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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 *emes*, “truth.” Each of these letters rests on two legs, so that they have a firm foundation. Truth is built on a firm foundation and endures.

א ב ג ד ה ו ז ח ט י כ ך ל מ ם נ ן ס ע פ ף צ ץ 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. A lie has no foundation and does not endure.

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

Comparing the placement of the letters for *emes* and the placement of the letters for *sheker*, we can see 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.

Ultimate truth – אמת – therefore is dependent on one’s ability to see the entire scope of the picture. Only G-d Himself has this capacity. We, as beings with limited ranges of vision, are simply not able to see the ‘whole picture’, and are therefore fundamentally incapable of being the arbitrators of what’s considered ‘true’ and ‘false’. Therefore, only G-d can dictate to us when one is allowed to “lie”.

**Answer:** Although it may appear to us that when certain values, such as peace, humility, and modesty, take precedence over truth, the value of truth is compromised, the truth of the matter (pun intended) is that this is not so: The real definition of ‘truth’ is doing what the Almighty Creator wants – the “right thing” – and the “right thing” to do is for peace, humility, and modesty to trump being literal. Why? Because G-d, in His ultimate scope of reality, knows and decides what’s true and good.

## 5 – QUALIFICATIONS

As we've seen, there are a few scenarios in which 'lying' or 'misleading' are indeed allowed. Even still, there are a number of notable qualifications which need to be taken in to consideration:

### #1 – Limit the Lie

#### Source 9. Orchos Tzadikim, end of Sha'ar 22

<p>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 Maseches so-and-so?” he should respond, “Do you really think that I know it?”</p> <p>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.</p>	<p>ובכל אלו שהתירו חכמים לשנות, אם יכול לעשות שלא ישקר, הוא טוב יותר ממה שישקר, כגון אם שואלין לו: יודע אתה מסכתא פלונית? ישיב: וכי אתה סבור שאני יודע?</p> <p>ואם יוכל לסלק השואל בענין שלא ישקר, הוא טוב מאד.</p>
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As much as possible, one should try to speak as literally truthful as he can.<sup>6</sup> The reason for this is what the Torah calls “למדו לשונם לדבר שקר”, namely, that if one accustoms his tongue to speak falsely (even though what he saying is ‘true’ in the ultimate sense), he’ll simply habituate himself to falsehood even in situations where lying is in fact forbidden.

### #2 – Children

#### Source 10. Yam Shel Shlomo, Yevamot 6:46

<p>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].</p>	<p>ונראה, דוקא דבר שהוא באקראי, אבל שליחות שהוא בין אביו לאמו לא ישנה, אפי' במשנה משום שלום</p>
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Where children are involved (either *directly*, for example involving themselves, or *indirectly*, for example as onlookers), lying is almost never allowed. Why? Because the broadened definition of ‘true & false’ (i.e. doing the will of G-d, or not) is simply too sophisticated for most children to understand.<sup>7</sup>

<sup>6</sup> A classic and poignant example of this is Yaakov’s response to Yitzchak, when the latter asked the prior for a verification of his identity as his son Esav. Instead of outright lying (as he was permitted to do, based on the prophecy of Rivka, who knew that Esav was a swindler who was not deserving of his fathers blessing), Yaakov’s response was “אנכי עשו בכורד”, which Rashi explains *could* be understood as “I – the one who’s bringing you food – and he is Esav your 1<sup>st</sup>-born” (Bereishis 27:19)

<sup>7</sup> As elaborated by R’ Yitchak Berkowitz *shlita*



### #3 – Misrepresenting the Torah

**Source 11. Yam Shel Shlomo, Bava Kama 4:9 – Lying about the details of a Torah law is prohibited even in a case of danger.**

<p>We also learn from this Baraisa [Where the Sages refused to alter or misconstrue the halacha, despite the fact that by doing so this was endangering their lives from the malevolent authorities] 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. ...for if one were to change a single Halacha, it would be tantamount to a denial of the entire Torah.</p>	<p>גם שמעינן מהאי ברייתא דאסור לשנות דברי תורה, אף כי הסכנה ...ואם ח"ו ישנה הדין הוה ככופר בתורת משה.</p>
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One is never allowed to change, misconstrue or misrepresent the Torah, even in situations which would seemingly be justified, such as endangering one's life. [See full text as well as explanation of the Maharshal in footnote<sup>8</sup>]

<sup>8</sup> ז"ל הברייתא ב"ק לה. ת"ר וכבר שלחה מלכות רומי שני סרדיוטות אצל חכמי ישראל למדונו תורתכם קראו ושנו ושלו בשעת פטירתן אמרו להם דקדקנו בכל תורתכם ואמת הוא חוץ מדבר זה שאתם אומרים שור של ישראל שנגח שור של כנעני פטור של כנעני שנגח שור של ישראל בין תם בין מועד משלם נזק שלם ממ"נ אי רעהו דוקא אפילו דכנעני כי נגח דישאל ליפטר ואי רעהו לאו דוקא אפילו דישאל כי נגח דכנעני לחייב ודבר זה אין אנו מודיעים אותו למלכות ע"כ

וז"ל המהרש"ל גם שמעינן מהאי ברייתא דאסור לשנות דברי תורה אף כי הסכנה וחייב למסור עצמו עליה דלפי חד שנוי דתו' [ד"ה קראו] שמלכות הרשעה גזרה עליהם ולמה לא ייראו חכמים שתעליל מלכות הרשעה עליהם הלא לא תמצא דבר קשה כזה לומר בפני האומות שאנחנו פטורין מהיזיקן והם חייבים, וכי לא היה ראוי לחוש ח"ו לכמה שמדות וחורבות דליפוק מיניה, בפרט מלכות הרשעה שכל מחשבתם רק להתגולל ולהתנפל על שונאינו, וא"כ היה להם לשנות או שניהם חייבים או שניהם פטורים. אלא ש"מ שמחויבים אנו למסור על קדוש השם, ואם ח"ו ישנה הדין הוה ככופר בתורת משה. ומסתמא איירי כגון שהשרים שאלו בפרטים על כל דין ודין, שור של ישראל שנגח לשל נכרי ושל נכרי שנגח של ישראל, ועל כן השיבו האמת על קדושת השם, כי לא היה יכולת בידם לשמט את עצמם מדין זה ע"כ

EXAMPLES:

- 1) George is selling his house. When a prospective buyer comes to see the house, he arranges that his friends, Larry & Tom, be in the apartment and appear wealthy as if they're interested in buying it. *Is this allowed??*
- 2) David, an active member of the parent-body of his children's school, Beis Jacob, is being honored at the annual school dinner. As he's introduced to receive his award, the MC says: "...amongst other activities, David is also a regular participant in the bi-weekly Torah-learning program at the Country Shul, which focuses on the halachos governing interpersonal-relationships." In truth, David has stopped coming to those classes quite some time ago. *By remaining silent, is he telling a lie?*
- 3) Is it permissible to make up a completely fictional story to improve the mood of a friend who is in the hospital. For example, 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.)
- 4) "Check out my new suit!" Eliyahu told his friend, Izzy, excitedly. "Nice! How much did you pay for it?" Izzy asked inquisitively. "\$500 dollars" said Eli. "What! You were cheated!" Izzy responded, in a rage. How should Izzy have responded?
- 5) Aaron: I heard that you're an expert in the laws of truth and falsehood! Bruno: I've learnt some of the laws but not all (even though Bruno is really an expert). Is this the correct response?
- 6) Charles: Why were you late to work this morning? In truth, Dan had been dealing with a private and sensitive personal matter involving his wife's health. How should he respond to Charles?