

White Lies, Right Lies?

'The Bride is always beautiful' and other lies we tell...

Yom Kippur 5784-Holy Blossom Temple

Source Sheet by Taylor Baruchel

Exodus 20:13

שמות כ':י"ג

(13) You shall not bear false witness
against your neighbor.

(יג) לֹא-תַעֲנֶה בְרֵעֶךָ עֵד שָׁקֵר: {ס}

Source 1) Tim C. Mazur, SCU Markkula Center for Applied Ethics
As taught by Rabbanit Jenna Englander

The philosopher Immanuel Kant said that lying was always morally wrong. He argued that all persons are born with an "intrinsic worth" that he called human dignity. This dignity derives from the fact that humans are uniquely rational agents, capable of freely making their own decisions, setting their own goals, and guiding their conduct by reason. To be human, said Kant, is to have the rational power of free choice; to be ethical, he continued, is to respect that power in oneself and others.

Lies are morally wrong, then, for two reasons. First, lying corrupts the most important quality of my being human: my ability to make free, rational choices. Each lie I tell contradicts the part of me that gives me moral worth. Second, my lies rob others of their freedom to choose rationally. When my lie leads people to decide other than they would had they known the truth, I have harmed their human dignity and autonomy. Kant believed that to value ourselves and others as ends instead of means, we have perfect duties (i.e., no exceptions) to avoid damaging, interfering with, or misusing the ability to make free decisions; in other words - no lying.

**Source 2) Talmud Bavli Masechet
Yevamot 63a**

תלמוד בבלי יבמות סד

Rav was being vexed by his wife. If he asked her to make lentils, she made peas. If he asked her to make peas, she made lentils. When his son Chiya got older, he (Chiya) would reverse the request (and then his mother would make what the father wanted).

רב הוה קא מצערא ליה דביתהו, כי אמר לה
עבידי לי טלופחי - עבדא ליה חימצי, חימצי -
עבדא ליה טלופחי. כי גדלחייא בריה, אפיך לה.
אמר ליה: איעליא לך אמך! אמר ליה: אנא הוא
דקא אפיכנא לה. אמר ליה, היינו דקא אמרי
אינשי: דנפיק מינך טעמא מלפך, את לא תעביד
הכי, שנאמר: יבלמדו לשונם דבר שקר העוה
וגו'

Rav said to his son: "Things are going better with your mother." [alt. translation, "your mother is improving"]

Chiya said: "I am reversing it for her."

Rav said: "This is what people say [a Talmudic expression for a popular adage]: The one who comes from you teaches you good sense. You should not do this, as the verse says, 'They have taught their tongue to speak lies and weary themselves to commit iniquity' (Jeremiah 9:5)."

Source 3) Talmud Bavli Ketubot 16b

Our Sages taught: How does one dance before the bride? What songs should one sing, what praises should one say?

The School of Shammai taught: “Say, ‘The bride is... as she is’”

And the School of Hillel taught: “Say ‘beautiful and graceful bride’!”

The School of Shammai said to the School of Hillel: “If she was lame or blind, does one say of her: ‘Beautiful and graceful bride’? Isn’t there a verse in the Torah that teaches ‘Keep far away from any kind of falsehood?!’”

The School of Hillel replied to the School of Shammai “According to your opinion, if someone has made a bad purchase in the market, should another praise it in his eyes or depreciate it? Surely, one should praise it in his eyes!”

Therefore the other Sages said: “Always should the disposition of a person be pleasant with other people.”

תלמוד בבלי מס' כתובות טו:–יז

תנו רבנן כיצד מרקדין לפני הכלה בית שמאי אומרים

דף יז, א גמרא כלה כמות שהיא ובית הלל אומרים כלה נאה וחסודה אמרו להן ב"ש לב"ה הרי שהיתה חגיגת או סומא אומר' לה כלה נאה וחסודה והתורה אמרה (שמות כג) מדבר שקר תרחק אמרו להם ב"ה לב"ש לדבריכם מי שלקח מקח רע מן השוק ישבחנו בעיניו או יגנו בעיניו הוי אומר ישבחנו בעיניו מכאן אמרו חכמים לעולם תהא דעתו של אדם מעורבת עם הבריות.