YESHIVAT HAR ETZION

ISRAEL KOSCHITZKY VIRTUAL BEIT MIDRASH (VBM)

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UNDERSTANDING AGGADA

By Rav Yitzchak Blau

In Loving Memory of

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לע"נ יהודה פנחס בן הרב שרגא פייוועל ז"ל

כ"ב אב תשכ"ח – י' אב תשע"ב

Shiur #04a: Limitations on Lying

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).

Rav said to his son: "Things are going better with your mother."

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' (Yirmiyahu 9:5)." (Yevamot 63a)

Rav apparently admires his son's clever strategy, as he mentions an adage about learning wisdom from children. At the same time, he instructs his son not to continue misreporting to his mother.

Several commentators wonder why Rav tells Chiya to stop. After all, it is a well-accepted halakhic principle that one is permitted to lie for the sake of preserving peace. A few pages later in the very same tractate (Yevamot 65b), we learn that God Himself deviated from the strict truth to preserve harmony between Avraham and Sarah. Why shouldn't Chiya employ the same principle?

 R. Shmuel Edels (Maharsha) sees the verse cited from Yirmiyahu as the key to the answer. The prophet there speaks about learning to prevaricate. A situation in which Chiya would constantly lie to his mother would train him for a life of deceit. While the occasional lie to protect someone's feelings will not have a negative educational impact, an ongoing pattern of falsehood will. Therefore, Rav directs Chiya to stop.

The Iyun Yaakov (a commentary by R. Yaakov Reisher found in the Ein Yaakov) mentions a different suggestion. He argues that in situations where the truth will invariably come to light, one should not lie. In such a case, the lie will only bring temporary relief until the full truth emerges, and then the deceived individual will respond with even greater anger.

We can understand that the Iyun Yaakov is making more than the pragmatic point of "Lie only when you can get away with it." Rather, he is also pointing out how often the spreader of falsehood becomes trapped in webs of his or her own making, and ultimately cannot keep the falsehood going. As a result, it behooves us to think carefully about lying, even when we do so for a good cause.

 R. Shelomo Luria (Yam Shel Shelomo) says that lying for the sake of peace is permitted only for the occasional lie, but not for a consistent policy of lying. While we could understand his point as being identical with that of Maharsha, R. Luria says nothing about training the child in deceit. Perhaps he intends to make a different point. If a relationship depends upon an ongoing pattern of falsehood, then the falsehood is not truly repairing the relationship, but only covering up the fact that something in the relationship is rotten. The occasional lie can be reconciled with a healthy and meaningful relationship, but not a lifetime of falsehood. Rav understands that Chiya's strategy does not truly address the tension between him and his wife, and he instructs Chiya to desist.

 The author of the Ben Ish Chai, R. Yosef Chayim, also wrote a commentary on the aggada, called Ben Yehoyada. There, he adds a point that works well with our understanding in the previous paragraph. He asks: Why did Chiya tell the truth to his father, and not just lie to him as well?

 We might answer that in these situations of tension between spouses, the children often feel responsible for the problem, attempt to bring reconciliation, and sometimes also end up choosing sides. Ben Yehoyada explains that not telling Rav would lead to calamity. Rav would think that the rift is repaired and would return to the former intimacy with his wife, including revealing his innermost secrets. If his wife remains angry with him, she will use those secrets to hurt Rav. Chiya understands that Rav must know the truth so that Chiya's strategy not damage his father.

 This explanation also strengthens our interpretation of the Yam Shel Shlomo's position, namely, that false solutions often cause more harm than good. Although not every rift can be healed, falsehood is no substitute for true resolution.

 It emerges that while Halakha does allow lying for the sake of peace, a few significant restrictions apply. One should not do so if such lying will train a person in falsehood, if the lie only brings temporary relief, or if the fabrication glosses over the real issues that need to be addressed.