

Truth and Lying

Biblical Sources - Laws:

(שמות כ: יב) לא תרצח ס לא תנאף ס לא תגנב ס לא תענה ברעך עד שקר: ס
Ex 20:13 You shall not murder. You shall not commit adultery. You shall not steal. You shall not bear false witness against your neighbor.

(שמות כ: ו) לא תשא את שם יְדוֹן אֱ-לֹהֶיךָ לְשׁוֹא כִּי לֹא יִנְקֶה יְדוֹן אֶת אֲשֶׁר יִשָּׂא אֶת שְׁמוֹ לְשׁוֹא:
Ex 20:7 You shall not swear falsely by the name of the LORD your God; for the LORD will not clear one who swears falsely by His name.

(שמות כג: ז) מְדַבֵּר שֶׁקֶר תִּרְחֹק וְנָקִי וְצַדִּיק אַל תִּהְרַג כִּי לֹא אֶצְדִּיק רָשָׁע:
Ex 23:7 Keep far from a false charge; do not bring death on those who are innocent and in the right, for I will not acquit the wrongdoer.

(ויקרא יט: יא) לֹא תִגְנְבוּ וְלֹא תִכְחֹשׁוּ וְלֹא תִשְׁקְרוּ אִישׁ בְּעֵמִיתוֹ:
(יב) וְלֹא תִשָּׁבְעוּ בְשֵׁמִי לְשֶׁקֶר וְחָלַלְתָּ אֶת שֵׁם אֱ-לֹהֶיךָ אֲנִי יְדוֹן:
Lev 19:11 You shall not steal; you shall not deal deceitfully or falsely with one another.
12 You shall not swear falsely by My name, profaning the name of your God: I am the LORD.

Biblical Sources – Narratives:

1. Adam & Havah (3:8)
2. Qayin (4:9)
3. Wife is Sister: Gen 12:10-20 and Gen 20:1-18 (and Gen 26:7-11)
4. Sarah Laughs - Gen 18:1-15
5. Binding of Isaac - Gen 22:1-19
6. Jacob and Blessing - Gen 27:1-45 and 29:25-26
7. Rachel and the Idol - Gen 31:1-37 (especially 31-35) and 35:16-21
8. Shechem – Gen 34 (especially v 13)
9. Judah and Tamar – Gen 38 (especially 25) and 37:32
10. Brothers deceive Jacob
11. Yosef deceives brothers
12. Samuel and Saul - 1 Sam 16:1-6

Second Temple Literature:

Philo on Joseph:

The politician must not just talk, but must have a twofold manner of speech, the one concerned with the truth and genuine advantage, the other based upon opinion and the giving of pleasure. For the politician cannot say right out whatever he thinks it would be advantageous for the people to understand, but must conceal some things for the reason that the hearer is often aroused to opposition by hearing what is not flattering and flatly refuses to obey the truth, so that no improvement is accomplished.

Rabbinic Sources:

1. Babylonian Talmud, Shevuot 30b.

[This source pertains to a court. The disciples are sitting before their masters, who are acting as judges, while two litigants dispute.]

[A] How do we know that a disciple sitting before his master, who sees that the poor man is right and the wealthy man wrong, should not remain silent? Because it is said, *Keep far from a false matter* (Ex 23:7).

[B] How do we know that a disciple to whom his master says, “You know that if I were given a hundred *maneh*, I would not tell a lie; now, so-and-so owes me one *maneh*, and I have only one witness against him” – how do we know the disciple should not join with him? Because it is said, *Keep far from a false matter* (Ex 23:7).

[According to Jewish law, there must be two witnesses. The master is inviting his disciple to testify to something his master tells him is true.]

Surely this is definite perjury, and the Torah said, *You shall not bear false witness against your neighbor* (Ex 20:13)?

[C] Well then, for example, if he said to him: “I definitely have one witness; and you come and stand there, and you need not say anything, so that you will not be uttering a lie from your mouth”; even so, it is prohibited because it is said, *Keep far from a false matter* (Ex 23:7).

- *What is the point of [A]? Would the student “lie” by keeping silent?*
- *In [B] and [C] why does the Master want his student to lie? Why does the Talmud forbid the lie even though it may prevent an injustice?*
- *What is the specific problem with relationships like master/disciple? What are some modern parallels?*
- *What is the general interpretation of Ex 23:7 according to this source? How is it different from Ex 20:13? What textual problem in Ex 20:13 is this Gemara addressing?*

2. Babylonian Talmud, Hulin 94a

[The Talmud stated that a Jew may not send a cut-up animal leg from which the sciatic nerve was not removed to a non-Jew. The sciatic nerve is not kosher for Jews but can be eaten by non-Jews. The Talmud then tries to figure out the reason for this prohibition.]

Alternatively, I can say, [it is forbidden] because he thereby deceives him, and Samuel holds that it is forbidden to deceive people (lit. to steal their mind) even gentiles.

This view of Samuel was not expressly stated but was inferred from the following incident. Samuel was once crossing on a ferryboat and he said to his attendant, ‘Reward the ferryman’. He rewarded him, but [Samuel] became angry. Why was he angry? — Abaye said: Because he [the attendant] had a non-kosher hen and he gave it to the ferryman representing it as one that was ritually slaughtered. Raba said: Because he [Samuel] told him to give him [the gentile] *anpaka* [a small cup for strong unmixed wine] to drink, and he gave him mixed wine to drink. And what if it was only inferred? — Because according to him who says that he gave him a non-kosher hen, it can be said [that Samuel was angry with his attendant] for keeping with him [a forbidden thing]. And according to him who says that he told him to give him *anpaka*, it can be said [that Samuel was angry] because *anpaka* really means unmixed wine.

It was taught: R. Meir used to say: A man should not urge his friend to dine with him when he knows that his friend will not do so. And he should not offer him many gifts when he knows that his friend will not accept them. And he should not open [for a guest] casks of wine which are to be sold by the shopkeeper, unless he informs [the guest] of it. And he should not invite him to anoint himself with oil if the jar is empty. If, however, the purpose is to show the guest great respect, it is permitted. But surely this cannot be right. For Ulla once came to Rab Judah's house and the latter opened up for him casks that were later to be sold by the shopkeeper! — He must have informed him of this fact. Or if you wish, I can say that the case of Ulla is different, for he was so dear to Rab Judah that he would have opened for him even those that were not [to be sold by the shopkeeper].

Our Rabbis taught: A man should not go to the house of a mourner with a bottle in which the wine shakes about; neither should he fill it with water because he thereby deceives him. If, however, there is a large assembly present, it is permitted.

Our Rabbis taught: A man should not sell to his neighbor shoes made of the hide of an animal which died, [representing them] as made of the hide of a living animal which was slaughtered, for two reasons: first, because he is deceiving him, and secondly, because of the danger. A man should not send to his neighbor a barrel of wine with oil floating at the mouth of it. It once happened that a man sent his friend a barrel of wine, and there was oil floating at the mouth of the barrel. He went and invited some guests to partake of it. When they came and he found that it was only wine he went and hanged himself.

3. Midrash Tanhuma 10, commenting on Gen 27:19. Cf. Rashi.

ואע"פ שאתם אומרים שיקר יעקב לא שיקר, בלעם אמר לא הביט און ביעקב (במדבר כג: כא), אלא [אמר] אנכי יעקב, עשו [הוא] בכורך וגו'

Even though you might say Jacob lied, he did not lie for Bilaam said, "There is no iniquity in Jacob." Rather, [this is what Jacob said]: "It is I, *Jacob*. Esau, *he is* your first born.

- *This midrash re-reads Jacob's answer in Gen 27. What does he mean in the biblical context? Why do the rabbis do this?*

4. Babylonian Talmud, Yevamot 65b:

וא"ר אילעא משום רבי אלעזר בר' שמעון: מותר לו לאדם לשנות בדבר השלום, שנאמר: (בראשית נ') אביך צוה וגו' כה תאמרו ליוסף אנה שא נא וגו'.
 ר' נתן אומר: מצוה, שנאמר: (שמואל א' ט"ז) ויאמר שמואל איך אלך ושמע שאול והרגני וגו'.
 דבי רבי ישמעאל תנא: גדול השלום, שאף הקדוש ברוך הוא שינה בו, דמעיקרא כתיב: (בראשית י"ח) ואדוני זקן, ולבסוף כתיב: ואני זקנתי.

R. Ilai stated in the name of R. Elazar b. R. Shimon: One may modify a statement in the interest of peace, for it is said, *Your father commanded us before he died saying, 'So shall you say unto Joseph, Forgive, I pray you, the transgression of your brothers...'* (Gen 50:17).

R. Nathan said, It is a commandment. Samuel said, *How can I go? If Saul hears it he will kill me.' And the Lord said, 'Take a heifer with you and say, I have come to sacrifice unto the Lord'* (1 Sam 16:2).

The House of R. Yishamel taught: Great is the value of peace for even the Holy One, blessed be He, changed [His words] because of it; for at first [Sarah] said, "My husband is old; but afterwards [God quotes her as saying], "I have become old."

- *To understand the proofs, look up the biblical passages. What was the "peace" in each case?*
- *What does "modify a statement" mean?*
- *What kinds of lies (or modifications) are allowed?*

5. Babylonian Talmud, Nedarim 62b

Rava also said: A rabbinical scholar may assert, "I am a servant of fire, and will not pay poll-tax." What is the reason? Because it is only said to drive away a lion.

- *In Babylonia, fire-worshipping Zoroastrians were exempt from poll tax, so by saying that he was a fire-worshipper, the rabbi would not have to pay. But sometimes God is compared to fire as in Deut 4:24.*
- *"To drive away a lion" seems to mean: to evade an unjust tax, extortion*

6. Mishnah Nedarim 3:4

נוֹדְרִין לְהַרְגִין וְלַחַרְמִין וְלַמּוֹכְסִין שֶׁהִיא תְרוּמָה אִף עַל פִּי שְׁאִינָה תְרוּמָה, שֶׁהֵן שֶׁל בֵּית הַמִּלְאָה אִף עַל פִּי שְׁאִינָן שֶׁל בֵּית הַמִּלְאָה.

בֵּית שְׁמַאי אוֹמְרִים, בְּכָל נוֹדְרִין, הוּץ מִבְּשׂוּעָה וּבֵית הֶלֶל אוֹמְרִים, אִף בְּשׂוּעָה. בֵּית שְׁמַאי אוֹמְרִים, לֹא יִפְתַּח לוֹ בְּנֶדֶר, וּבֵית הֶלֶל אוֹמְרִים, אִף יִפְתַּח לוֹ.

בֵּית שְׁמַאי אוֹמְרִים, בְּמָה שֶׁהוּא מְדִירוֹ, וּבֵית הֶלֶל אוֹמְרִים, אִף בְּמָה שְׁאִינוֹ מְדִירוֹ. כִּיצַד, אָמְרוּ לוֹ אָמֹר קֹנָם אֲשֶׁתִּי נְהַנִּית לִי וְאָמֹר קֹנָם אֲשֶׁתִּי וּבְנֵי נְהַנִּין לִי. בֵּית שְׁמַאי אוֹמְרִים, אֲשֶׁתּוֹ מִתְּרַת וּבְנָיו אֲסוּרִין. וּבֵית הֶלֶל אוֹמְרִים, אֵלֹו וְאֵלֹו מִתְּרִין.

They take a vow to murderers, robbers, and publicans (Jewish tax collectors) that it [the produce they demand] is *terumah* even if it is not; or that it belongs to the royal house even if it does not.

The House of Shammai say, "In any form of words they vow except in the form of an oath." And the House of Hillel say, "Even in the form of an oath." The House of Shammai say, "One should not [volunteer to] take a vow at the outset." And the House of Hillel say, "Also: One [voluntarily] takes a vow at the outset."

The House of Shammai say, "[One takes a vow] only in the matter concerning which the vow is imposed." And the House of Hillel say, "Also: concerning that in which the vow is not imposed." How so? [If] they said to him, "Say: "Qonam be any benefit my wife has with me!" and he said, "Qonam be any benefit my wife and children have with me!" The House of Shammai say, "His wife is permitted, and his children prohibited." And the House of Hillel say, "These and those are permitted."

- *Why may one lie in the previous two cases?*
- *About what do the houses disagree?*
- *What does this imply about cheating on your US taxes?*

7. Babylonian Talmud Eruvin 53b:

[A] R. Yehoshua b Hanania said: I was once staying at an inn where the hostess served me beans. On the first day I ate all of them, leaving nothing. On the second day, too, I left nothing. On the third day she over-seasoned them with salt and, as soon as I tasted them I withdrew my hand. "My master," she said to me, "why do you not eat?" I replied, "I have already eaten earlier in the day."

[B] Rav Yehudah said in the name of Shemuel: In the following three matters the sages modify their words: Tractate (of Talmud), Bed, and Hospitality.

- *Why are lies permitted here? Are they all lies?*
- *What values are in tension, and which wins out?*
- *Apparently, the meaning of part [B] is that if one asks a sage if he knows a certain tractate, he can say he does not, or he will be boasting. "Bed" seems to refer to marital relations. Perhaps if he is asked about his sex life, he can lie. "Hospitality" seems to mean that if one is asked whether he had a good meal at someone else's house, or a comfortable stay, he should say no, lest others invite themselves over to the host.*

8. Tractate Kallah Rabati 9:1

כיצד מרקדין לפני כלה, בית שמאי אומרים כלה כמות שהיא, ובית הלל אומרים כלה נאה וחסודה, אמרו בית שמאי לבית הלל, לדבריכם הרי שהיתה חגיגת או סומא, אומרין לה כלה נאה וחסודה, והתורה אמרה מדבר שקר תרחק, אמרו להם בית הלל לבית שמאי, לדבריכם מי שלקח מקח רע מן השוק, ישבחנו בפניו או יגננו בפניו, הוי אומר ישבחנו בפניו, לפיכך בית הלל אומרים תהא דעת אדם מעורבת עם הבריות.

[A] ובית הלל, נמי ליכא הכא נאה במעשיה, דילמא נאה מבתי אבות וחסידה במעשיה, דאחזוקי בבישותא לא מחזקינן.

[B] ובית שמאי, מי כתיב משקר תרחק, מדבר, אפילו סתם;

[C] ובית הילל, כי קאמר רחמנא מדבר שקר תרחק, משום ונקי וצדיק אל תהרג, היא לקומי שפיר דמי.

How does one dance before the bride? The House of Shammai says: The bride as she is. And the House of Hillel says: Beautiful and graceful bride!

The House of Shammai said to the House of Hillel: "What if she is lame and blind? Is it not written, Keep far from a false matter" (Ex 23:7)? The House of Hillel replied: If one has made a bad purchase, should one praise it in [the owner's] eyes or deprecate it? Surely one should praise it in his eyes." Therefore the House of Hillel used to say: "The disposition of human beings should always be pleasant towards their fellow-creatures."

[A] The House of Hillel too can say that beautiful can be understood as beautiful in her deeds or beautiful in her family line and graceful in her person, because we do not presume [to call someone] something embarrassing.

[B] And what would the House of Shammai reply to this? They could say, "Is it written Keep far from a lie? [No. It is written, Keep far from a false] matter - even if it is inexplicit.

[C] What would the House of Hillel reply to this? They could say, "When the Almighty declared *Keep far from a false matter*, it was only meant in the context of what follows, *Do not bring death on the innocent and the righteous*. But where it is a case of preserving life [like here], it is proper to depart from the strict truth.

- *To "dance before the bride" means to praise the bride.*

- What are the two ethical positions set out here?
- What are the two values in tension?
- How would the House of Shammai dance before the bride? What would they say to an ugly bride?
- In the Talmudic commentary, how do both schools justify their opinions?
- The House of Hillel answer the objection of the House of Shammai in both the Mishnah and in the Talmud. How do their replies differ? Which is stronger?
- The Talmud suggests there are restrictions as to what lie the House of Hillel would allow. What are the restrictions?

9. Mishnah Abot 1:18:

רַבֵּן שִׁמְעוֹן בֶּן גַּמְלִיאֵל אוֹמֵר, עַל שְׁלֹשָׁה דְבָרִים הָעוֹלָם עוֹמֵד, עַל הַדִּין וְעַל הָאֱמֶת וְעַל הַשְּׁלוֹם. שֶׁנֶּאֱמַר (זְכוּרִיהָ ח) אֱמֶת וּמִשְׁפָּט שְׁלוֹם שֶׁפִּטוּ בְּשַׁעְרֵיכֶם

Rabban Shimon b. Gamaliel said: By three things is the world sustained, by truth, by justice and by peace, as it is written, *Execute the justice of truth and peace in your gates* (Zech 8:16).

- What is the meaning of the statement that “the world is sustained” by these three things? Why three things, not just one of the three?
- What does that imply about the value of truth?

10. Beresheet Rabbah 8:4

R. Shimon said: In the hour when God was about to create Adam, the angels of the presence divided into factions. Some said, “Let him not be created.” Others said, “Let him be created.” Thus it says, *Faithfulness and Truth meet; Justice and Well-Being kiss* (Ps 85:11).

Love said, “Let him be created, for he will do loving deeds.”

Truth said, “Let him not be created, for he will be all falsity.”

Righteousness said, “let him be created for he will do righteous deeds.”

Peace said, “Let him not be created, for he will be all quarrel and discord.”

What did God do? He seized hold of Truth and cast her on to the earth, as it says, *You did cast Truth to the ground* (Dan 8:12). then the angels of the presence said to God: “Master of the universe. How you despise your angel of truth; let truth arise our of the earth,” as it says *Truth springs up from the earth* (Ps 85:12).

- What is the view of human beings reflected in this midrash? Good? Bad? Mixed? Why?
- What does this source say about human beings and truth?

11. Babylonian Talmud, Sanhedrin 97a:

Rabba said: I used to think that there was no such thing as truth in all the world. Then a certain sage, and R. Tavuth was his name, who would never lie even if one offered him all the treasures in the world, told me that he once came to a place called Qushta (=Truth). The inhabitants of the place never told lies, and none of them ever died prematurely. The sage married a wife there, who bore him two sons. Once his wife was

sitting and washing her hair when a neighbor came and knocked at the door. The husband thought it unseemly [to tell her that his wife was washing] so he told her that his wife was not at home. Then his two sons died. The townsmen came to him and questioned him, “What is the cause of this?” He related what had happened and they said, “Please leave our place and do not tempt death to come here.”

- *Why did the sage lie? Is this so bad? Do we ever tell lies like this?*
- *What are the consequences of lying according to this story?*
- *What is Rabba’s point in telling it? Is Qushta a real place? Note that Rava says that R. Tavuth never lies (hence we can believe the story). But in the story doesn’t he lie? What is going on?*



Further Reading:

Levine, Aaron, “False Goodwill and Halakha,” Tradition 34,1 (2000) 4-43.