

Is Lying Ever Permitted?

"You must not steal. You must not act deceptively or lie to one another." - Leviticus 19:11 HCSB



We must be very careful to not allow ourselves to be overly simplistic in our approach to moral dilemmas. For instance, in advocating honesty, Immanuel Kant went so far as to say that if a murderer were to ask where his potential victim was, an honest person would be obligated to tell him!¹

Augustine also said, "...a lie may never be told for the preservation of the temporal life of another."² Respectfully, Kant and Augustine are dead wrong and contradicting the clear example of Scripture.

Hashem is supremely concerned with justice.³ Biblically, ethical principles are not relative, but they are nested and hierarchical and the principle of justice overrides all other concerns including the very important principle of honesty.

Before we go further, we must be clear in understanding that there are very few instances in which justice is better served by dishonesty. It is not going to be a common experience.

Having said that, let's consider the example of Rahab. She saved the lives of the Israeli spies by lying.⁴ Not only was she saved from the destruction of Jericho, but so was her entire family. We are told that this came about specifically because of her action.⁵ She was further granted the privilege of being in the Messianic line,⁶ admission into the great Hall of Faith⁷ and James tells us that it was this action that justified her!⁸

God ordered the use of deceit in the capture of the town of Ai, commanding Joshua to set an ambush for the men of the city.⁹ The presumable motivation was to save the lives of the Israeli soldiers. A long, drawn out battle would have cost a far greater number of lives so God allowed the stratagem of deceit when it might save lives in a military action.

God Himself used the same tactic in the pursuit of justice. In order to make sure that a mass murderer got his comeuppance, God sent an evil spirit to cause the lords of Shechem to treat Abimelech deceitfully so that the crime he committed against the seventy sons of Jerubbaal might be avenged.¹⁰

Granted, it is sometimes difficult to know if justice is best served by honesty or dishonesty. For instance what if, as it used to be in 18th century England, simple theft was punished by death? Would a Christian be obligated to honestly describe a theft he'd witnessed when he knew it would result in a punishment that is disproportionate to the crime? I would think not, but it must be up to the conscience of each Christian.¹¹

Generally speaking, however, lying is permitted in those very rare instances when the preservation of human life is at stake.

¹ *On a Supposed Right to Lie from Benevolent Motives*

² *Treatises on Various Subjects; "On Lying"*

³ Exodus 23:2; Deuteronomy 16:20

⁴ Joshua 2:3-6

⁵ Joshua 6:17, 23, 25

⁶ Matthew 1:5

⁷ Hebrews 11:31

⁸ James 2:25

⁹ Joshua 8:2

¹⁰ Judges 9:23-24

¹¹ Romans 14:13-23; 1 Corinthians 8:4-13; 10:23-33; 1 Timothy 1:5