

Shayla: How does not bearing false witness correlate with the story of Rahab and the rules of lashon hara?

Midrash:

First, in order to establish context we need to remember that the verse you are referring to is found within the Decalogue, or as it is more popularly known the “Ten Commandments.” The verse reads...

- Exodus 20:16 HCSB Do not give false testimony against your neighbor.

Hashem placed several measures within halakha (the formal law) that were designed to protect the accused. Witnesses to a crime testified before a court of elders. This kept decisions from being made by a mob. At least two witnesses were required for evidence to be valid.¹ The witnesses had to start the execution in capital punishment cases.² This made sure the witness would have to face the full emotional baggage that went along with their accusation and that they would not be able to distance themselves from the consequences of their words. Further, the punishment for perjury was that the punishment that would have been assigned to the accused had he or she been found guilty would instead be given to the perjurer. This went along with the whole limitation of damages to:

- Exodus 21:23-25 HCSB If there is an injury, then you must give life for life, 24 eye for eye, tooth for tooth, hand for hand, foot for foot, 25 burn for burn, bruise for bruise, wound for wound.

Taking Exodus 20:16 at its normal “literal” and “negative” interpretation, we may draw two conclusions. First, we are not to lie or deceive and second, we are not to remain silent when faced with deception. This is what David meant when he said.

- Psalms 101:7 HCSB No one who acts deceitfully will live in my palace; no one who tells lies will remain in my presence.

Reading this verse in the normal “literal” fashion, but inverting its interpretation to the “positive” side, leads us to draw two other conclusions. First, we are to be truthful witnesses when asked to testify. Second, we are to promote social mores in which truth may be told. It is for this second positive application that we applaud those who lied to the Nazis in their efforts to hide Jews. Had the Nazis overcome in that war, holiness and integrity would have suffered a great loss. Those moral heroes were obeying (consciously or unconsciously) Hashem’s warning that says:

- Proverbs 24:10-12 HCSB If you do nothing in a difficult time, your strength is limited. 11 Rescue those being taken off to death, and save those stumbling toward slaughter. 12 If you say, "But we didn't know about this," won't He who weighs hearts consider it? Won't He who protects your life know? Won't He repay a person according to his work?

In the effort to achieve a greater good (that of saving lives and promoting a free society) the normal rules of engagement change. For instance, consider the case of Jael and Sisera. Barak was commanded by the Lord through Deborah the prophetess to engage and destroy Sisera. Because Barak superstitiously refused to go forward without Deborah physically being present, the Lord said that he would still win but that the glory would go to a woman.³

Barak did indeed overcome Sisera’s armies but allowed Sisera to escape. A woman named Jael deceptively lured Sisera into her tent with promises of protection and care but once he had fallen asleep in his exhaustion, she drove a tent peg through his temple and killed him.⁴

The Angel of the Lord which is a theophany of the Son of God, said through Deborah,

- Judges 5:23-24 HCSB "Curse Meroz," says the Angel of the LORD, "Bitterly curse her inhabitants, for they did not come to help the LORD, to help the LORD against the mighty

¹ Numbers 35:30, Deuteronomy 17:6, 19:15

² Deuteronomy 13:10, 17:7, 19:16-20

³ Judges 4:9

⁴ Judges 4:17-23

warriors." 24 Jael is most blessed of women, the wife of Heber the Kenite; she is most blessed among tent-dwelling women.

The Lord considered Jael's actions an act of Godly love⁵ and blessed her above all her peers for it.

In the first case, deception saved innocent lives. In the second, deception was used to kill one who deserved judgment. To bring a modern application, apply these principles to the following two examples. If a murderer were to ask you where a potential victim was, you would be obligated to deceive him, even at the risk of losing your own life. However, if a police officer were to approach and ask you where the murderer was, you would be obligated to tell the police officer, even if you thought the encounter might lead to the murderer's death.

Obviously this means that each person must make a judgment as to what the correct course of action is in any given situation which simply enforces the clear Scriptural mandate that each one is responsible for himself and his decisions.⁶

Returning to the verse at issue (Exodus 16:20), it is important to remember that though we may at times deceive, we are to be committed to Truth as a governing principle. It is simply that Justice overrules Truth in certain extreme cases.

The verse in question must be understood within the context of formal law and the court system in which it was given. There were two very serious charges that could be made against false witnesses.

The first was motzi shem ra which is to make false charges or misrepresentations that would defame or damage another's reputation. Say, a business man wants to damage another's reputation (and sales) by implying that his opponent waters down his gas or some such. This is clearly motzi shem ra, lashon hara and worthy of discipline.

The second was "avak lashon hara" which is literally "the dust of an evil tongue." In this case a person is not making a positive statement that could entrap him if the lie is discovered. What the person does is simply choose which part of the truth to tell. It is in the lack of full disclosure or the timing of the telling in which the sin lies. Because it is more insidious, in my opinion this is a far more dangerous sin and should be dealt with more harshly by the elders. We must not make room for equivocation or self-justification when we consider when to lie or not. One of the overriding concerns that make a lie shmirat ha lashon (righteous or healthy speech) is that it is done for another. It is not generally done in cases of mere self-preservation. The degree of damage done to another is also an element that must be considered. Saving their lives may make lying worthwhile. Saving their feelings probably does not make the cut.

Rahab was not in court. She was not asked to tell the truth in order to engender justice. She was asked to give over two of Yahweh's people to the torturer and executioner. She chose to save their lives and because of her to' elet Yahweh Mishpat ruled in her favor.

⁵ Judges 5:31

⁶ Exodus 32:31-34; Jeremiah 31:29-30; Ezekiel 18:20;