

**Shayla:** May we conceal truth from a terminal patient?

**Extended question:** I often have to deal with patients who have been diagnosed with a fatal disease. What if the person is very old? What if there's no point in telling them because there's no real cure or even a treatment? Am I obliged to always tell them the whole truth? How do I know how much to reveal and when?

**Responsum:**

Biblically speaking, honesty is generally the best policy. God expects and deserves integrity.<sup>1</sup> He detests liars and cheats.<sup>2</sup> We are not to act deceptively or to lie to one another.<sup>3</sup> Those who try to gain from dishonesty will find that the perks simply don't last.<sup>4</sup> We often lie in order to escape consequences (including being the bearer of bad news) but true leaders value those who speak the truth<sup>5</sup> and being dishonest about someone is considered as harmful and lasting as physical wounds.<sup>6</sup> We are commanded to stay away from false testimony and that we must be sure that our word does not have fatal consequences.<sup>7</sup>

On the other hand, "doing what is righteous and just is more acceptable to the Lord than sacrifice."<sup>8</sup> The difficulty is in knowing what is "righteous" in any given situation. For instance, the classic imaginary situation is being in a room and a person (designated A) enters the room and declares their intent to kill another person (designated B). You happen to know where B is. If the murderous A asks you B's location, do you tell them? Augustine, Aquinas and Kant say you must.

However, the commandment to "speak truth to one another" is accompanied by the warning to "not plot evil" in our hearts against our neighbor<sup>9</sup> and we are further told that to refuse to tell hard truths to our neighbor is to hate him in our hearts and to incur guilt.<sup>10</sup> So, we know that a large part of the issue that must be considered is to have the ultimate good of the person at heart. In that particular case, revealing B's location to A is good for neither. B will likely die a violent death, and A will face both humanity's and God's judgment.

So, contrary to Augustine, Aquinas, and Kant, we believe that lying is permitted when the motive is to save lives or to promote the cause of peace. After all, Adonai Himself carefully selected how much truth to reveal to Abram. Sarah considered both herself and Abram too old to have children, but Hashem only revealed Sarah's view of herself on the matter.<sup>11</sup>

In view of these principles we believe that, were a murderer to ask for the location of a victim, we would be permitted to lie to save lives. Were we asked to spy for our country (with all the consequential lies involved), we would be permitted to do so in order that many lives may be saved that would otherwise have to die in battle.

Solomon tells us,

- [Proverbs 12:22-23 HCSB](#) Lying lips are detestable to the LORD, but faithful people are His delight. (23) A shrewd person conceals knowledge, but a foolish heart publicizes stupidity.

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<sup>1</sup> Psalm 51:6; Psalms 119:29

<sup>2</sup> Proverbs 11:1

<sup>3</sup> Leviticus 19:11

<sup>4</sup> Proverbs 21:6

<sup>5</sup> Proverbs 16:13

<sup>6</sup> Proverbs 25:18

<sup>7</sup> Exodus 23:7

<sup>8</sup> Proverbs 21:3

<sup>9</sup> Zechariah 8:16-17

<sup>10</sup> Leviticus 19:17

<sup>11</sup> Genesis 18:12-13

Again, we see that generally speaking, lying is detestable. However, a shrewd person conceals some knowledge. A wise man does not necessarily reveal everything he knows. As the Brit Hadashah puts it, the necessity is not bald truth, but truth driven by compassionate motives.<sup>12</sup>

So, the question is not really “may we lie to terminally ill patients”, but “is lying to terminally patients good for them, and if so, when?”

One well-known factor that must be taken into consideration is the so-called “placebo effect”. Sometimes a fake treatment, say the administration of distilled water, saline solution, or a sugar pill, can sometimes improve a patient's condition simply because the person has the expectation that it will be helpful. The more a person believes they are going to benefit from a treatment, the more likely it is that they will experience a benefit. As the Talmud says, “Where there is hope, there is life.” So, at times, deceiving a patient may allow us to take full advantage of the wonderful chemical factory that is the human brain.

On the other hand, if we lie to the patient, and the placebo effect is not sufficient to their medical condition, they will be unable to put their affairs in order or to properly say goodbye to their families before they die.

There are a few examples of deceiving terminally ill patients in the Scriptures. In 2 Kings 8:7-15, the prophet Elisha received a messenger from King Ben-Hadad who was terminally ill. The messenger was tasked with asking whether King Ben-Hadad would recover or not. However, the Lord had already revealed to the prophet that the messenger, named Hazael, would assassinate the king. Elisha basically confirms Hazael's plot “go ahead and tell him he'll recover but I know better.” Then he tries to shame Hazael by revealing how wicked a king he would be in Ben-Hadad's place. In the end however, Hazael lies to Ben-Hadad and then suffocates him.

On the other hand, Isaiah spoke the plain, bald truth to King Hezekiah who had some kind of terminal skin disease.

- [Isaiah 38:1](#) cp [2 Kings 20:1](#) HCSB In those days Hezekiah became terminally ill. The prophet Isaiah son of Amoz came and said to him, "This is what the LORD says: 'Put your affairs in order, for you are about to die; you will not recover.'"

Some would condemn Isaiah for being so blunt to a dying patient. They would encourage mouthing platitudes to the patient so that they feel at peace. However, note what happens because of Isaiah's brutal honesty.

- [2 Kings 20:2-5](#) HCSB Then Hezekiah turned his face to the wall and prayed to the LORD, (3) "Please LORD, remember how I have walked before You faithfully and wholeheartedly and have done what is good in Your sight." And Hezekiah wept bitterly. (4) Isaiah had not yet gone out of the inner courtyard when the word of the LORD came to him: (5) "Go back and tell Hezekiah, the leader of My people, 'This is what the LORD God of your ancestor David says: I have heard your prayer; I have seen your tears. Look, I will heal you. On the third day *from now* you will go up to the LORD's temple."

Hezekiah's disease was apparently not one of those random things that happen due to the chaos of the universe. It had some type of psycho/spiritual basis. By pressuring Hezekiah to face his need for the Lord, Isaiah actually did the very thing needed to save Hezekiah's life.

Again, some would support deception if they felt it would be a detriment to the person's recovery. So, if a very ill person's loved one died, the “deceptionists” would support not telling them until later, if at all, lest the bad news overwhelm them emotionally and it do them more harm than good. The argument would be “They can't do anything about the dead person but they might be able to recover their health so you're giving up what you can't keep anyway to

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<sup>12</sup> Ephesians 4:15

gain a possible benefit.” From there it’s a very small step to deceiving a terminally ill patient. If you know that they will definitely die and there’s nothing that can be done about it but you might possibly give them a little better quality of life...

Extra-biblically, that point has long held support by such luminaries as Hippocrates, Galen, Drs. Thomas Percival, and Oliver Wendell Holmes. They each recommended concealing the truth from a terminally ill patient.

On the other side of the fence, the Church all the way through the medieval ages supported telling the patient the truth of the matter so that they could put their affairs in order, both with men and God. The Jewish point of view was the same. A famous Jewish physician named Amatus Lusitanus penned a medical oath in 1559. In it he states:

*“If I speak falsehood, may God and his angel Raphael punish me with their eternal wrath and may no one henceforth place trust in me.”*<sup>13</sup>

The thirteenth-century German *Sefer Hassidim* (Book of the Pious) reads:

*“An expert physician who knows how to determine from a patient's urine or by other methods if a patient will die. If the patient says: "Don't conceal anything from me! You are only [lying] in order not to upset me, but I would be much happier to know the truth!" If he does not want to live because he is in great pain or if he is very old - the physician should tell him the truth. Or if the patient needs to take care of his affairs, the physician should tell him: "Have no fear, but in any case take care of your affairs." And if he sees that the patient does not wish to know, he should [nonetheless] tell him, as it is written: "Set your affairs in order; for you are going to die, you will not live" (2 Kings 20:1).”*<sup>14</sup>

Returning to our biblical examples, consider that Elisha did not lie to the patient. He was dealing with the patient’s would-be murderer, not the patient himself. That example thus cannot be used to support lying to a patient.

In the second example, Isaiah WAS directly face-to-face with the patient and chose to speak the whole truth. So in the one on-point example, the truth was spoken.

Since the 1950s up to 98% of US patients surveyed stated that they wanted to know the truth.<sup>15</sup> As a physician I believe that one of the principle issues that must be on your mind is the will of your patient. You must also consider how much help you will be to your patient if they ever realize that you have been lying to them. Most patients today (or their families) have access to the internet and are far more knowledgeable than patients used to be. They also are much more insistent on their right to know and to be a part of the “team”. What if they begin thinking that you are “blowing smoke” and that another, alternative therapy may have been available to them had they only know of the gravity of the situation? How’s your litigation insurance?

My advice would be that if you realize that the patient does not truly want to know, or wants to quit fighting because of the extreme pain and suffering, then don’t tell them what they don’t want to hear anyway. A wise man does not necessarily reveal all he knows.

On the other hand, your standard, default setting should be to tell the whole, unadulterated truth. It’s not just that they have the right to know; getting good, timely information is beneficial. There is a great burden of proof required to clearly demonstrate that telling them the truth would actually be harmful to them.

In the end, it’s not as important WHAT you tell them as HOW you tell them. Speaking the truth compassionately<sup>16</sup> may be a sophisticated art for a doctor, but it is no less a command

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<sup>13</sup> Harry Friedenwald, *The Jews and Medicine*, vol. 1, Baltimore, 1944, p. 368.

<sup>14</sup> *Sefer Hassidim*, ed. Berlin, 1891, p. 66, par. 154.

<sup>15</sup> 15. R. M. Veatch, *Encyclopedia of Bioethics*, p. 1678 and Bok, *Lying*, p. 229 and note 11.

<sup>16</sup> Ephesians 4:15

for a physician as it is for an elder of the congregation. Speak plainly; speak gently; and hold out as much hope as you can honestly. If they are truly dying – help them die well.

Also see the following Responsa:

- Is deceit ever allowed
- Lying, it is ever permitted