

Shayla: Is lying ever permitted?

Response:

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, another man who, in my opinion, is characterized by overly simplistic, quasi-superstitious religious views, 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.

As a general rule, if your conscience is bothering you about a moral decision, you need to listen to your conscience because if you go against it, to you that is a sin, regardless of whether or not someone else feels a liberty to do something different.¹¹ I know for a fact that one of the principle goals of the apostle's instruction was that we have a pure heart, a good conscience and a sincere faith!¹²

So may we lie in order to say, save another's feelings? No! Not hurting another person's feelings about their ugly dress simply does not rise to the standard of justice. This does not mean that you may be cruel! Your speech should always be gracious, seasoned with salt, so that you may know how you should answer each person.¹³ Just because you think something, that doesn't mean that you are obligated to say it!¹⁴ Instruction is only appreciated if it is well presented.¹⁵ Be tactful.

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

¹² 1 Timothy 1:5

¹³ Colossians 4:6; Proverbs 13:18

¹⁴ Proverbs 12:23; 17:27-28; James 1:19

¹⁵ Proverbs 16:21