

# VEBDE REBDE

## Lying to Avoid Embarrassment

**Question:** If someone asks you a tactless, unnecessary question, the answer to which is embarrassing, and refusing to answer is like admitting the truth, is it permitted to lie?

**Answer:** The broadest of the Torah prohibitions against lying (even without language of oaths) is “mid’var sheker tirschak” (distance yourself from a matter of falsehood - Sh’mot 23:7). Philosophically, we abhor dishonesty. We are to emulate Hashem, about Whom it is said: “Hashem’s signet is truth” (Sanhedrin 64a).

Yet, gemarot spell out cases in which one may and/or even should lie. One gemara (Yevamot 65b) says that one may lie to preserve peace. One precedent it cites is that Hashem inaccurately related to Avraham what Sarah had said about their chance of having a baby at an advanced age. Another (Bava Metzia 23b) lists three things about which it is appropriate for a scholar to lie. The third example is not to publicize that one’s host was very welcoming, if it will cause unwanted guests to flock to him (see Rashi ad loc.).

In all of these cases, the untruth was said to protect someone else, unlike in your question. However, the above sources include cases of self-

protection. The first gemara also gives the example of Yosef’s brothers trying to ward off his enmity with a lie. Another example in Bava Metzia is lying about what one is learning/has learned. Rashi explains it as minimizing one’s scholarship out of humility; the Lechem Mishneh’s understands the Rambam (Aveida 14:13) as avoiding people testing him on a weak topic to avoid embarrassment. This last source is equivalent to your question. But even Rashi’s case makes us think why one can do an ostensible aveira for humility’s sake!

The simplest answer is that the prohibition of lying refers to different types of cases. The pasuk’s context is beit din proceedings, in which the pursuit of truth is at a premium. The Yere’im (mitzva 235), while extending the mitzva somewhat, limits it to lies which harm someone. This matter seems to depend on the machloket between Beit Shammai and Beit Hillel (Ketubot 17a). Beit Hillel encourages singing the praises of a bride, even when they are untrue. Beit Shammai argues that this violates “midevar sheker tirschak”. Beit Hillel makes a moral argument based on concern for the feelings of others, but, how does that sentiment dispose of Beit Shammai’s pasuk? Apparently, the argument is whether the Yere’im is correct, and we pasken like Beit Hillel (see Rav Perlow on Rasag’s Sefer Hamitzvot, Aseh 22). The other possibility is that even if lying about

something innocuous is forbidden from the Torah, Chazal understood, perhaps based on the precedents in Tanach, that in the case of important counter-factors, it is waived.

We have dealt (Living the Halachic Process V, H-2) with poskim's permission to stage a fake pidyon haben if needed to save a couple from embarrassment about the wife previous pregnancy. K'vod haberiyot (human dignity) justifies significant halachic leniency (Berachot 19b), which far exceed some of the factors that, we have seen, justify lying.

Do note that regarding k'vod haberiyot, the degree of breach of human dignity helps determine the level of leniency (Tosafot, Shvuot 30b), so that there is no blanket permission. Furthermore, even when speaking untruthfully is permitted, it is noble to raise one's level of honesty to the point that he lies or even distorts (as Yaakov did to receive Yitzchak's blessings) only when it is clearly morally called for. Sometimes, a little embarrassment from answering a tactless question honestly is not so bad, and sometimes the truth will actually teach the person a lesson. Sometimes the insult to the tactless person (some of whom may have problems) of refusing to answer itself compromises shalom. There are far too many circumstances and factors to address in a general presentation. However, the basic conclusion is that a "white lie" to

protect one's own dignity is often permitted, but, on the other hand, should be weighed carefully.

*Rav Daniel Mann, Eretz Hemdah Institute*

Questions? email [info@eretzhemdah.org](mailto:info@eretzhemdah.org)