

Tell Me Sweet Little Lies

There is a classic debate in the Talmud between Hillel and Shammai over what you say to a bride on her wedding day. Do you tell her that she is beautiful no matter what she looks like, or are you honest with her because honesty is the best policy? The debate speaks to what it really means to lie. In certain circumstances, telling a little white lie might be for someone's benefit, allowing an individual to move on without causing any harm, ever. But, there are times when a little white lie can spread out of control, turning into a full-fledged lie that leaves people devastated and relationships ruined forever.

When we teach the story of the boy who cried wolf, we teach from an early age that lying is bad. It is interesting then that the first time Avraham speaks in the narrative of the *Torah*, it is a lie that he tells. In *parshat Lech Lecha*, we are finally introduced to Avram and Sarai, later Avraham and Sarah, who become the great matriarch and patriarch of the rest of our narrative. We learn that Avraham follows God with full intent, without questioning, and that Sarah goes with him. As they approach the land and learn that there is a famine there, Avraham becomes worried about his future and about the safety of his wife. So, he asks Sarah to tell a little white lie. Chapter 12 verse 11, the first time Avraham speaks, states, "As he was about to enter Egypt, he said to his wife Sarai, "I know what a beautiful woman you are. If the Egyptians see you, and think, 'She is his wife,' they will kill me and let you live. Please say that you are my sister, that it may go well with me because of you, and that I may remain alive thanks to you.""

The *midrash Tanhuma*, a collection of 4th century writings, suggests that the reason for this lie is that Avraham, after so many years of marriage, took his wife's beauty for granted until he became aware of how others regarded her. Another interpretation put forth picks up that in verse 10 the text tells us that Avram went *down* to Egypt, telling us not of his direction, but rather the moral level of that society was lower, and so Avraham too lowered his morals to fit in. What bothers me is that each of these explanations makes excuses for Avraham's lie. He is clearly looking out for himself and trying to make sure that he survives, but this lie puts his wife in danger and his own life at stake. Later, when the king takes Sarai and horrible repercussions follow, Avraham is called out on his lie and forced to tell the truth.

The fact is, Avraham lied, and the lie had consequences. But, what it teaches us is that even Avraham who was chosen by God to become the father of the Israelite nation was not perfect. There is room for learning and room for growth. Avraham was not yet at the point where he had absolute blind faith in God. He was still growing in his relationship with God and growing as a human being. We often fall into the trap of holding our leaders to a higher standard, and in a certain sense, it is true that we want our leaders to be truthful, trustworthy, wise and honest, but we must remember that all of us stumble along the way as we figure out the world. Avraham made a mistake; he lied, but found his way back to the path of truth and faith in God. None of us can expect to be perfect; real righteousness, real leadership means recovering and learning from our stumbles and allowing others to do the same.

ללמוד **To Learn:** ללמד **To Teach:** When a figure like Avraham is caught in a lie it brings of questions of leadership and values. When talking about these issues with your kids it is often helpful to have many different opinions. Visit Jewish Values Online, <http://www.jewishvaluesonline.org/>, a wonderful website that has an archive full of answers to questions on values. Each question has an answer from a reform, conservative and orthodox viewpoint.

לשמור **To Keep:** לעשות **To Do:** The text teaches in chapter 13, verse 2 that Avraham was very rich. The Hebrew word used for "rich" here is *Kaved*, which means heavy or burdened. The text continues to teach that Avraham needed to unload this burden in order to live off the land. Giving Tzedakah means giving of yourself to help lighten the load someone else might be carrying. A tradition teaches that to do this, every week right before Shabbat we should take the change from our pockets and give it to our Tzedakah box.