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On the Parsha

“And he (Yaakov) said, ‘Swear to me.’ And he (Yoseph) swore to him. Then Yisrael (Yaakov) bowed at the head of the bed.” (Bereishis 47:31) This verse discusses Yaakov Avinu’s desire to be buried in the land of Israel and his insistence that Yoseph swear to bury him there.

It is interesting to note that in the prior verse, Yoseph had already given his father his word that he would bury him in Israel. Why did Yaakov insist that Yoseph swear to it?

The Ramban provides us with two answers: The first answer is that if Pharaoh was hesitant to permit Yoseph to keep his commitment to Yaakov, Yoseph could tell Pharaoh that he had taken an oath and must do it – this would help persuade Pharaoh into letting him keep his commitment. The second answer is that Yoseph would try harder to keep his word since in addition to the promise that he made to Yaakov, he also took an oath about it.

The implication according to the Ramban’s second answer, is that Yaakov suspected that there could be a point at which Yoseph could rationalize not being able to fulfill his father’s wishes and say to himself, “It is now too difficult to keep what I had promised my father. Surely, my father would have been amenable to be buried here in Egypt had he known of the obstacles and challenges I am now facing. I have done the best I can.” To allay this concern, Yaakov made Yoseph swear to him that he would be buried in Israel. The oath would provide Yoseph with the extra motivation needed to fulfill what he had committed to do even if it seemed impossible initially.

This teaches us that without the creation of additional motivation, a person may not have sufficient motivation to fulfill a promise when difficulties arise. This can affect anyone – even someone on the level of Yoseph. In his Sefer Derech Aliyah, Rav Shmuel Hoenigsberg of Bnei Brak, cites

this Ramban to encourage us to employ additional means and motivators to help us fulfill our goals and values. As an example, one knows that the Torah requires one to be honest in business. However, as an extra motivation, one may choose to bring a picture of his Rabbi to work with him and place it on his desk as extra motivation to guarantee that he will be honest.

It bears mentioning that the Chofetz Chaim in the seventh chapter of his Sefer “Sfas Tamim” cites a Sifrei that says that fulfilling one’s words is a fulfillment of the Torah Mitzvah of “V’Halachta B’Drachav” – walking in His ways. This is because one of Hashem’s “ways” is Emes – truth.

Chizuk - Inspiration

Rav Yisroel Hager ZT”L,

the third Rebbe of Vizhnitz, was the son of the saintly Rabbi Baruch of Vizhnitz. He was born on August 20, 1860 and was known as the “Ahavas Yisroel”. In 1893 he was appointed as Rebbe in Vyzhnytsia. He invigorated the Vizhnitzer dynasty and attracted many more followers from the surrounding provinces. He established many Talmud Torahs (small institutions for students with modest backgrounds), and a Yeshiva which was one of the largest dormitory Yeshivas in Europe to which he appointed his son Rabbi Menachem Mendel as Rosh Yeshiva.

He was known for being very careful to always tell the truth. He was also a remarkable Ohaiv Yisroel – a man whose love of people knew no bounds. Once he had to write a response to an inquiry from a particular Rabbi. When writing a response to a Rabbi, the custom was to address the Rabbi with certain honorifics (e.g. “Our Master”, “The Brilliant One”, etc.) However, Rav Hager felt that one of the honorifics that he was expected to use did not apply to this particular Rabbi. What should he do? On the one hand, calling the Rabbi by a title that did not apply was not Emes. On the other hand, the Rabbi may be insulted if the honorific was not used.

Rav Hager decided not to respond to the Rabbi in a letter through the mail, but rather to respond by telegram. In this manner, the Rabbi would be honored that a response to his inquiry came so quickly via telegram, and at the same time, the lack of honorifics would not be insulting because the Rabbi would assume that the honorifics were not used, because of the significant expense that would be incurred for each additional word in a telegram. In this manner, he was able to fulfill both ideals – not hurting another’s feelings and always telling the truth.

Halacha – Jewish Law **QUESTION:** My mother was with me in the labor and delivery room. My mother did not know the gender of the baby. I, and the nurse attending to me, did know the gender.

However, I told the nurse not to tell my mother, because my mother had expressed a desire to be surprised when the time comes. However, while we were all in the delivery room, the nurse slipped and accidentally referred to the baby by its correct gender. Realizing that she had made a mistake, she tried covering it up by saying, “I never know what the baby’s gender is before its born, so I refer to the baby’s gender randomly.” My question is, “Was the nurse allowed to lie to cover for her mistake?”

ANSWER: There appears to be a contradiction between two of the Chofetz Chaim’s writings. In Ahavas Chessed (3:8) the Chofetz Chaim explains that an “act” of Chessed (kindness) can be done not only through a kind action, but even through one’s kind words. As an example, he explains that if one is among people who are suspected of stealing (i.e. thieves), it is a kindness and one gets a Mitzvah, to lie on account of Shalom (to keep the peace). Accordingly, he can say that the individual they are considering robbing is a poor person when he is not. In that situation, the Chofetz Chaim says that one gets a “Mitzvah” for lying for Shalom.

However, in the Mishna Brurah (156:4) he writes that one must distance oneself from a lie. However, it is permitted to lie on account of Shalom. In this instance, the Chofetz Chaim uses the term “permitted” to lie for peace. So, which one is it? Is

one merely permitted to lie to keep the peace or is it an actual Mitzvah?

Rav Chaim Pinchas Scheinberg ZT”L gives two answers to this question (cited in HaOtzar HaAmiti p. 209).

Answer 1) In a case where the damage to be done is common / likely (Shchiach Hezeikah), like in the case above of thieves discussing a target to rob, one would get a Mitzvah if they lied to prevent it. If there was a lesser likelihood that the damage was to occur, then one would be permitted to lie, but it would not be a Mitzvah.

Answer 2) In a case where monetary damage may occur, like in the case above, where thieves are discussing a target to rob, one would get a Mitzvah if one lied to prevent it. However, if there was no monetary loss involved, but one was lying to keep the peace, e.g. to prevent hurt feelings, then one would be permitted to lie, but it would not be a Mitzvah.

Getting back to your question about the nurse lying in the delivery room to cover for her mistake. According to Answer 1), if it is likely that the mother will be considerably upset that she knows the gender of the baby, then the nurse gets a Mitzvah to lie to cover for her mistake. However, if there is a lesser concern that she will be upset, then the nurse would not get a Mitzvah, but it would nonetheless be permitted.

According to Answer 2), since there is no monetary loss involved in finding out the gender of the baby, the nurse certainly does not get a Mitzvah to lie to cover for her mistake. Nonetheless it is permitted to prevent hurt feelings.