

## HONESTY

Questions raised:

- Can a journalist's "white lie" be justified?
- Do Jewish values permit a lie in the service of a greater good?

The TV series *House of Cards* shows exaggerated depictions of the behavior of politicians as murders, yet its representation of the relentless journalist is accurate. As journalists we know that once the seed of a story has been planted, we go through great lengths to reap the fruit. We will make countless phone calls, work during odd hours, and drive to the most remote of places if it may lead to a story. In attempts to develop our reports, we may deny our own identity, such as with a Russian-Israeli journalist,<sup>i</sup> who concealed her Jewish identity in order to cover the Egyptian revolution. The lies we may tell though, are not always necessary as with protecting ourselves from death. Under what circumstances may we tell a white lie?

Immanuel Kant, the 18th century German philosopher whose thinking has deeply influenced Western thought,<sup>ii</sup> saw right and wrong as dichotomous and built a system wherein questions of ethics were answered by their ability to be formed into a universal law. Because we would not want to turn lying into a universal law, it is therefore never acceptable.

Judaism, by contrast, does not strive to build universal laws and teaches us to investigate cases individually. The Bible often sets out strict prohibitions that appear on their face to be absolute. Exodus 23:7 commands one to distance oneself from lies (מדבר שקר תרחק). Yet the Talmud, as it does in many cases of Biblical absolutes, tries to derive a nuanced understanding that assists in real-life circumstances. One of the classic situations related to lying is found in BT Ketubot 17a, where the rabbis try to answer the question, *How do we dance in front of [or make happy] the bride?* The House of Hillel answers that the bride should be told she is *yaffa v'chasuda*, pretty and modest or God-fearing. What, however, if the bride is not pretty? Two contradictory sentiments arise: on one hand we want to make the bride happy, yet on the other there is in fact a clear biblical prohibition against lying.

A *makhloket* (dispute) between the House of Hillel and the House of Shammai ensues. Hillel deems it permissible to lie to the bride on the day of her wedding. Yet Shammai does not see how clear commandments may be disregarded. The Talmud concludes in accordance with the House of Hillel: Even if the bride is not pretty, she should be told that she is. The biblical prohibition should be ignored, because in this situation, telling a white lie that will make a bride happy is preferred to abiding by the strict words of the Torah.

The layperson and Jewish journalist alike learn from this that under certain conditions, *and having considered and met a very high threshold*, lying may be permitted and may even be encouraged if the result brings about a positive outcome. But the stipulations under which one may lie are specific. Both the white lie told to the bride, and the white lies journalists may tell to get a report, must have legitimate rationales.

When then, may a journalist lie to get the story? What are the stipulations legitimizing the lie? Using the Talmudic guidance, a lie may be told if it brings about a greater good and is done without malicious intent.

How can a journalist define the “greater good”? One standard a Jewish journalist may apply is the concept of *tikkun olam*, or “fixing” the world.

Deuteronomy 16:20 says: “Justice, justice you shall pursue,” and this may be the criterion the journalist uses when deciding if a white lie may be told. Commentator Noam Zion connects this to BT Baba Batra 131a, wherein a judge is granted with permission to “follow what his eyes see,” or to follow his intuition in making a decision.<sup>iii</sup> The journalist likewise, is granted this same authority to use his intuition to determine whether a white lie may be told. This helps us distinguish among scenarios in which a white lie is justifiable or not.

Here are two scenarios you may face:

A significant community member confides in a journalist about personal issues, not knowing that he is a journalist. The journalist then publicizes the conversation. Using the criterion of justice which *tikkun olam* stipulates, is the journalist’s failure to disclose his identity justifiable?

A journalist speaks to a high-ranking rabbi, who is unaware he is a journalist. This rabbi divulges a plan which may tear the community apart and result in the loss of funding for a local Jewish school. Should the journalist publish the story?

Each of the cases must be analyzed individually, keeping in mind the goal of *tikkun olam*, or improving the world. While knowing about a prominent community member’s private life may be of larger interest, here the question is about the legitimacy of the journalist’s self-misrepresentation. However, if the information disclosed is clearly of significant community interest, the journalist’s misrepresentation is not only acceptable but is in fact desired because of the positive outcome. As with the Talmudic case of the bride, the preferred ends may only be reached with a lie.

The Hartman Institute’s North American President, Dr. Yehuda Kurtzer, says that the question of defense of deception may be most pertinent to the Jewish journalism world in whether it is credible and defensible for Jewish journalists to have a baseline framework of support for Jews, Jewish communities, and the State of Israel before they provide hopefully objective analysis and reporting, or whether that in and of itself is a violation of journalistic standards.

Kurtzer says that the current state of world affairs make the Jewish media’s baseline framework of support for Israel and Jews an ethically defensible position, but his caveat is that it also requires a subjective ethic orientation in which group affinity and identity is privileged not merely as a functional operating system but as a standard of ethical behavior.

What these analyses indicate is that it is not easy to define the absolute conditions the journalist may use in determining if a white lie is acceptable. However, by applying Jewish values, a Jewish journalist can obtain justification for an action that Western moral standards consider unacceptable. Sometimes, it is indeed permitted to tell a lie for the sake of the community. Yet sometimes there is no legitimate justification for disregarding the biblical prohibition against lying.

- Rachel Jaret & Alan D. Abbey

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<sup>i</sup> <http://www.mitvim.org.il/en/experts/100-ms-ksenia-svetlova>

<sup>ii</sup> <http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/kant/>

<sup>iii</sup> In the article, *Maimonides' Theory of Judicial Discretion: Tikkun Olam Supersedes Due Process*