

Do not accept a futile report. (23:1)

Growing up, one of the easiest types of tests to ace was the “true” or “false” quiz. After all, it was either true or false. Growing up, the distinction between true or false was perceived as quite simple: it was no different than yes or no. Moving on from there, we assume that something which has been proven correct or real is considered true, while something which has failed to be proven true is false. Obviously, there are areas in which this does not prove correct, since a claim that has not been credited as true does not necessarily mean that it is false. Truth is supposed to be an absolute which means that it is perfect or unlimited. If this is the case, who determines that the proof is sufficient or even valid enough to make it true? In a recent article, a psychologist asked a pertinent question concerning perceptions and fact. A blind person who never saw light in his life would consider light a myth, while one who sees clearly considers light a fact. Perception can deceive. A schizophrenic patient has been proven by science to be delusional. They “interact” with “people” whom they consider real, and, therefore, true. We, on the other hand, know their existence to be false. Do we have the right to deny their existence, to consider them false?

I have written this preamble to demonstrate that variations and distinctions exist with regard to the definition of true and false. As Torah Jews, as believing, G-d-fearing Jews, our basis for defining true and false is the Torah as interpreted by our *gedolim* – nothing else matters.

Of the many *mitzvos bein adam l'chaveiro*, between man and his fellow, is the prohibition of believing *lashon hora*, slander. Regarding the admonition not to accept a futile report, *Rashi* comments that this means not to accept a false report (*Targum Onkeles*). It is forbidden to accept *lashon hora*. Additionally, a judge is warned not to listen to one party without the other party being present.

Horav Shlomo Wolbe, zl, observes that the commandment not to accept a false report does not refer to believing a lie; rather, it refers to believing *lashon hora*, which is generally true! What is false about *lashon hora*? It is slander; it is wrong, but who says it is false? Yet, the *Targum* and *Rashi* define *lashon hora* as *sheker*, falsehood, when, in fact, it is probably true.

Rav Wolbe teaches us a new perspective concerning the definition of truth. Truth is not measured by the spoken word, but by the intent behind it. (This has nothing to do with the end justifying the means; rather, in this instance, the end defines the means). Even if the statement is completely true, but was said with the express purpose of harming another person, it is considered a false statement, since the intention to harm another person is inherently false. Anything that causes harm, creates distress, makes a person feel bad, is considered “false.”

While people can accept this notion of falsehood, it comes with a flipside. A blatantly false statement, if expressed for the purpose of doing good, of creating harmony, at a time or circumstance that warrants it – is considered true. Hashem is G-d of truth. (*Chosamo shel Hakadosh Baruch Hu Emes*; G-d’s seal is the truth.) Yet, upon repeating to Avraham Avinu what

Sarah *Imeinu* had said concerning him: *va'adoni zakein*, my husband is old, Hashem changed the statement (*va'ani zakanti*, I am old), for the sake of *shalom bayis*, harmony between husband and wife. The intention was pure; thus, the statement was true.

This is likewise the rationale behind the second prohibition included in “Do not accept a futile report.” The fact that one has stated his version of the story not in the presence of the other litigant does not necessary imply that the person is lying. His words, however, are labeled as false, because his intention is to sway the judge (who is supposed to be impartial) in his favor. Since this causes harm to his opponent, what he is doing is rendered as a falsehood.

Rav Wolbe sums it up with an observation that *sheker*, falsehood, is the only *middah*, character trait, from which the Torah enjoins us to distance ourselves: *Midvar sheker tirchak*, “Distance yourself from a falsehood” (*Shemos* 23:7). On the other hand, concerning illicit, immoral relations, the Torah admonishes us, *Lo sikrevu*, “Do not come close” (*Vayikra* 18:6). We must run from anything false – from false words and from true words that are accompanied with a negative or harmful intentions. How often do we hear someone say, “But it is true”? This does not validate harmful intent, because, in reality, no greater falsehood exists than a harmful intention obscured beneath the veil of a true statement.