

Relationships in the Parasha

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Parashat Vayera: Balancing Truth with Compassion

Is Peace Really Greater than Truth, or Can They Be Harmonized?

Must We Always Say Everything for the Sake of Honesty?

Since childhood, I have been unable to lie. I never wanted to, and on the few occasions when someone asked me to, I simply couldn't. Whatever I said, I knew my clear blue eyes would reveal the truth. I have always valued speaking my truth, though this has sometimes caused conflict when others did not welcome it. Over time, I learned that being truthful does not mean sharing every detail with everyone. Experience has taught me that withholding information can be the right choice when revealing it would needlessly hurt others. Yet, only in my later years have I fully integrated the Talmudic teaching:

תלמוד בבלי, יבמות סה ע"ב

כְּשֶׁם שֶׁמִּצְוָה עַל אָדָם לֵאמֹר דְּבַר הַנִּשְׁמָע, כֵּן מִצְוָה עַל אָדָם שְׁלֹא לֵאמֹר דְּבַר שֶׁאֵינוֹ נִשְׁמָע:

Just as it is a mitzvah to say something that will be heeded, so is it a mitzvah not to say something that will not be heeded (*Babylonian Talmud, Yevamot 65b*).

I have softened over the years and avoided much conflict by holding back from speaking my truth indiscriminately. I have learned to tune in and listen more closely, to consider the person before me, and to filter my words with greater care. I try to adapt both what I say and how I express it to what the other person is ready to hear and accept. Sometimes a concern can be expressed gently at a more suitable moment; at times it is wiser to remain silent and allow the other person space to reach their own understanding.

When I became Torah observant and learned the laws of *shemirat halashon* (guarding our speech), I discovered that the truth of a statement alone does not determine whether it should be spoken. The prohibition of *Lashon hara* (derogatory speech) is defined precisely by being true. False derogatory accusations fall under the still more severe prohibition of *motzi shem ra* (defamation). This understanding has also helped me become more discerning about what I reveal about myself. Honesty need not become an impulse to confess every mistake, expose every vulnerability, or offer personal details that serve no constructive purpose. I have also learned that it is not always worthwhile or necessary to reveal incriminating information about oneself. Thus, I always tell my students that when dealing with authorities, they need not volunteer every detail that could implicate them. Yet if asked directly, they must always tell the truth.

The same sensitivity belongs in our relationships: we can acknowledge our shortcomings without reducing ourselves to them, just as we can recognize another person's faults without making those faults our main focus. I am still learning this balance – to speak with integrity while allowing wisdom, kindness, and respect to guide what I share. *Parashat Vayera* offers a beautiful example of Hashem Himself choosing which words to omit for the sake of peace.

Must Everything We Hear Be Repeated?

Sometimes we hear a remark about someone close to us and feel compelled to pass it on. We may even consider ourselves obligated to give an accurate account of every word. Yet, before repeating something potentially hurtful, we can ask ourselves: What will these words accomplish? In *Parashat Vayera*, Hashem Himself teaches us to consider how our retelling will affect a relationship:

ספר בראשית פרק יח פסוק יב וַתִּצְחַק שָׂרָה בְּקִרְבָּהּ לֵאמֹר אַחֲרֵי בְלִתִּי הִיְתָה לִי עֲדָנָה וְאֵדְנִי זָקֵן:

ספר בראשית פרק יח פסוק יג וַיֹּאמֶר הָשֵׁם אֶל־אַבְרָהָם לְמָה זֶה צִחֻקָּהּ שָׂרָה לֵאמֹר הֲאֵף אֲמַנָּם אֵלֶּיךָ וְאֲנִי זָקְנָתִי:
 “Sarah laughed within herself, saying, ‘After I have grown old, shall I have renewed pleasure, while my husband is old?’” Hashem said to Avraham, ‘Why did Sarah laugh, saying, Shall I indeed give birth, when I have grown old?’” (*Bereishit* 18:12–13).

When Sarah wondered about her own aging, she added that her husband was old. Yet, when Hashem conveyed her words to Avraham, He omitted her comment about him. Rashi explains that Scripture altered her words for the sake of peace (Rashi, *Bereishit* 18:13). Bar Kappara emphasizes the greatness of peace: even Scripture changed its account to bring peace between Avraham and Sarah (*Pesikta Zutarta*, *Bereishit* 18:13). Hashem addressed Sarah’s laughter without passing on the part of her words that could hurt her husband. We, too, can pause before becoming the messenger of a remark that may create distance between people.

When May We Alter Our Words for the Sake of Peace?

Does protecting peace require compromising truth? The Ramban explains that Hashem’s retelling was entirely true: Sarah’s words about being worn out already referred to her own aging. Hashem omitted only her additional comment about Avraham, rather than reporting that both of them were old (Ramban, *Bereishit* 18:13). According to this explanation, the change consisted of leaving something out, without saying anything untrue. This offers a deeper understanding of how truth and peace can coexist. Sarah’s concern was conveyed faithfully, even though her exact words were not repeated in full. Hashem conveyed what was necessary to address Sarah’s doubt while omitting her comment about Avraham, teaching us to avoid words that could hurt a husband’s feelings.

The *Da’at Zekenim* takes this teaching a step further: according to one explanation, while Hashem conveyed only part of Sarah’s words, people are permitted to alter their wording more fully for the sake of peace (*Da’at Zekenim*, *Bereishit* 18:13). This requires discernment, especially when we are personally involved. Are we changing our words to protect a relationship, or merely to protect ourselves from embarrassment? Are we helping two people understand one another, or avoiding an uncomfortable admission that could lead to reconciliation? Sometimes preserving peace requires acknowledging a painful truth and taking responsibility for our actions. At other times, repeating a passing criticism gives it a weight and permanence it never deserved. A moment of frustration need not become the lasting picture one person carries of another. The purpose of the change must remain the peace we seek to preserve, guided by sincere concern for the people whose relationship has been entrusted to our words.

How Can We Address a Problem Without Causing Unnecessary Hurt?

Rabbi Yosef Bechor Shor explains that it would have been inconsiderate to reveal to Avraham that Sarah had called him old, lest he take offense (*Bechor Shor*, *Bereishit* 18:13). Why would Sarah’s reference to Avraham’s age offend when he already knew how old he was? A fact we readily acknowledge about ourselves can still hurt when we hear that someone we love has spoken of it as a limitation. I recall being deeply touched by a teaching from Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch’s commentary: a husband should never be considered old in his wife’s eyes. Although I have not been able to locate the source again in his writings, this insight has remained close to my heart. Being married to a husband seven years my senior, I have treasured the youthfulness I continue to see in him. I also appreciate his reciprocating by overlooking my wrinkles! There is something beautiful about growing older together while continuing to see the vitality and youthfulness in one another.

The Chizkuni sharpens our understanding of Sarah’s words: Sarah recognized that her own youthfulness had returned, but saw Avraham’s age as the remaining obstacle to having a child. Her words therefore placed the difficulty entirely on him (Chizkuni, *Bereishit* 18:13). Repeating them could have made Avraham feel blamed. Hashem still addressed the laughter and the doubt it expressed, while withholding the detail

that could cause marital hurt. We can learn to distinguish between what needs to be addressed and what needlessly wounds. Before speaking, we might ask: Am I helping this person understand something necessary? Can I convey the concern with greater sensitivity? Especially in our closest relationships, care for another person's dignity belongs within the way we communicate truth.

How Can Our Words Become a Vessel for Peace and Blessing?

Learning when to speak and when to remain silent is an inner work of bringing different qualities into harmony. Our desire to express truth must meet our compassion and sensitivity to another person's heart. Rabbi Avraham ben David of Posquières describes shalom as the force that mediates between *Chesed* (kindness) and *Din* (judgment), uniting right and left. Peace is an expression of *Yesod* – the foundation upon which the world stands (The Ra'avad, *Sefer Yetzirah* 4:1). In our relationships, we can understand this as a call to integrate discernment and compassion. Judgment recognizes what needs correction, while kindness remains attentive to the person who needs to hear it. Peace joins these qualities so that we can address a difficulty while preserving our love and respect for one another. This harmony also prepares us to receive blessing, as our sages teach:

משנה עוקצים פרק ג משנה יב

אמר רבי שמעון בן חלפתא: לא מצא הקדוש ברוך הוא כלי מחזיק ברכה לישראל אלא השלום:

Rabbi Shimon ben Chalafta said: Hashem found no vessel capable of holding blessing for Israel other than peace (*Mishnah, Uktzin* 3:12).

Just as a vessel enables us to receive and retain what is poured into it, peace allows us to enjoy and sustain the blessings Hashem bestows upon us. Even if a home is filled with material comforts, constant conflict can make it difficult to appreciate them. When there is understanding and goodwill between us, even simple gifts – a shared meal, a quiet evening, or time together – can bring deep fulfillment.

Rabbi David Leifer teaches that Hashem continually bestows abundance, yet we must become a vessel prepared to receive it. He connects receiving this blessing with going beyond the letter of the law, letting go of resentment, and persevering in our love of peace with others (Ohev Chesed, *Parashat Shoftim*). Sometimes our insistence on expressing every detail leaves little room for another person. By softening that insistence, we make space for understanding, forgiveness, and renewed closeness. This willingness to forgive and yield opens our hearts to Hashem's blessing. Rabbi Aharon Perlow explains that our prayers culminate in peace because peace encompasses all the blessings flowing into this world (Beit Aharon, *Parashat Pinchas*). Returning to Avraham and Sarah, we discover this lofty teaching within the intimacy of marriage. Hashem's care for Avraham's feelings – protecting him from words that could wound him – safeguarded their closeness and revealed the preciousness of *shalom bayit* (peace between husband and wife).

We, too, can learn to acknowledge a concern without allowing it to obscure the goodness of the person we love. Even as we grow older together, we can continue to regard one another with freshness, appreciation, and hope. Each time we choose our words with care, we help make our relationship a vessel for blessing. May Hashem guide our lips and hearts, so that the truths we speak bring us closer and the words we withhold help our relationships become vessels for His abundant blessings.

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