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Is there ever a time when it is all right to lie?

Response by Rabbi Peter Schweitzer

What's wrong with lying? When lies are discovered, they undermine trust and destabilize. They make it hard to rely on someone in the future telling us the truth. Worst of all, they insidiously cause us to become skeptics – even of those who are telling the truth -- because lies have a way of bringing on anxiety and an uncertainty about what to believe no matter how trustworthy the source.

But what if lies are not discovered? Are they harmless then? Not really. Perhaps they do no damage to the recipient, but the lie-tellers risk eroding their own moral self-worth. Worst of all, getting away with telling lies can lead to going down the road to an ever greater departure from honesty.

So is it ever okay to lie? Hidden behind the question is an assumption that lying is always morally wrong, a view espoused by Kant. But what if the sanctity of telling the truth may endanger a life -- say of a Jew harbored by a righteous gentile during the Holocaust? Or, according to Biblical legend, when Rahab lied to protect the spies, or when the Hebrew midwives lied to Pharaoh to protect the lives of the Hebrew children? In these cases, lying was a virtue, not a crime. In direct opposition to Kant, not lying in these situations would actually have been immoral.

Perhaps these examples are too obvious. What about more nuanced situations where someone is tempted to lie to protect another from bad news, especially about a medical prognosis. Here one may decide that it is not ethical to lie outright, but nor is one obligated to divulge all information unless asked. In this case, lying is not the issue, but censorship. What is at stake is another person's human dignity and whether we have the right to judge what another is entitled to learn. As a Humanist rabbi, I would counsel sharing even difficult information – which may, in fact, be more troubling for the message bearer than the recipient of the news.

Secular humanists recognize that ethics are shaped by history and inherited teachings that are regularly challenged by real human experience. Morality is not prescribed once-and-for-all as one set of rules for all conditions but is a constant process of negotiation. It emerges out of an ever-evolving human condition. We may start out with a hierarchy of values – and “not lying” may be high on the list – but we often must weigh alternatives – even alternatives among absolutes.

So is it ever okay to lie? Absolutely.

Rabbi Peter Schweitzer presents a view of Humanistic Judaism as a regular contributor to Moment Magazine's "Ask the Rabbis" column. The response printed here may be slightly altered from the version that first appeared in the magazine. You can find Moment Magazine on-line at www.momentmag.com.