

Vayera: About truths, lies and white lies – November 2, 2012

There is a well-known and very interesting passage in the Talmud that speaks about what we should say to a bride during her wedding. And there, the two famous schools in the times of the Mishna, Beit Hillel and Beit Shamai have an important disagreement: While Beit Shamai says we should have to praise the bride according to how she is, Bet Hillel thinks that we always have to say to her: “The bride is lovely and charming”.

But then Beit Shamai asks to Beit Hillel: “And what would happen if the bride is lame or blind?” What would happen if she is not so “charming”? Are you still going to say to her that she is pretty or lovely? Because if you do it, you will be lying!

But Beit Hillel didn't agree with them. For Beit Hillel, saying to a bride “charming” even when we don't really believe that, is not a lie... And the sages of the Talmud said they were right... because we always should try to get along with other people and preserve peace.

This controversial passage of the Talmud is basically saying that there are situations in life when we are permitted, and also suggested, not to be absolutely sincere and to tell what we call a “little white lie” in order to maintain the harmony between us.

But we know that Beit Shamai's argument is very strong: We read in the Torah that is absolutely prohibited to tell lies: “*midvar sheker tirschak*”, “*You have to distance yourself from any false thing*” (Shmot 23:7).

So, what makes Beit Hillel to learn that there are situations where we should express our truths trough a “white lie”, and

also how can we know when we should act in that way? We can find the answer in our Parsha, Vayera.

Besides many interesting stories, the Torah tells us this week about the first time when someone said a “white lie”. And guess who was that person? Was God himself.

Probably you remember that Sarah, Abraham’s wife, couldn’t have children and only at the last stage of her life God granted her the blessing of giving birth to Isaac. Our Parsha tells us about the moment when God sent three angels to Abraham in order to share with him those good news.

But curiously Sarah wasn’t with his husband when he was speaking with the angels, and even though she was far away in the kitchen preparing food for the guests, she was able to listen to their words and about the miracle God was going to do.

And what did she do after hearing the news? Instead of being happy, she laughed and said: “Now that physically I can’t have children and my husband Abraham is too old... now we are told that we are going to have a child?!” And God, upset with Sarah’s reply, decided to speak privately with Abraham and telling him what happened: “Abraham, why Sarah laughed? Why she said “How could I, being old, still have a child”?”

If we pay attention to this dialogue, we will notice that God’s recalling of Sarah’s words actually doesn’t represent what she really said! She was surprised of the possibility of having a child being she and Abraham so old, but when God spoke with Abraham to tell him what Sarah said, God only mentioned that Sarah was surprised of her being old! God misquoted Sara in purpose, and he did that for *Shalom Bayit*, in order to preserve the peace and the relationship between husband and wife.

How we should understand God's action? Did he actually lie to Abraham in not quoting Sarah literally?

It is possible to think in that way, but is not what the Torah wants to teach us:

God knew perfectly that Sarah didn't intend to offend his husband saying that he was an old person, and also knew that if Abraham would have listened to those words probably he would have been upset and maybe a rupture between them could have aroused. So knowing her real intention, God decided to "correct" her wording and to preserve the *Shalom Bayit*.

So, can we say that God really "lied" to Abraham?

Technically speaking, we would probably think he was..., but that is not the way how our tradition sees it: God wasn't changing the truth, the opposite: He was preserving it... He knew the real intentions of Sarah, and that's why he decided to say that little "white lie".

And I think what happened to God with Sarah is very similar to situations that we frequently live. We hear people saying things about others that if we quote them literally probably we will create ruptures and fights: "I heard when he said that you did this and this..." But are we taking on account what we know about the person who we are mentioning? What do we know about how he or she is? Are we sure that his or her words really represent his or her intentions?

It is not enough to say to us "It is true because that is what I heard". It is not enough because sometimes the way we speak doesn't represents necessarily what we think or feel. Because people not always are so conscious about how they speak, or maybe because it is impossible to perfectly control the way we express ourselves, it is really important, before we quote someone else, to try to think about his or

her possible intentions. If we know that person, and we know he probably didn't want to say something bad, we should try to "correct" his wording in order to prevent a rupture between friends.

And the same applies to the way we speak: We should be careful with what we say and how we say it. Sometimes, in order to avoid making other people feel bad and also to be sure we will be expressing only our real intentions, it is not bad to change the words we use. If we do it we will be promoting peace and love between our fellows.

So the next time we attend a wedding and we maybe think the groom or the bride are not so well dressed, it is fine to say to them: "How good you look today!", because we will be sharing with them our sincere and good intentions.

Shabat Shalom!