THE MITZVAH OF LYING
Rabbi Dan Moskovitz – OCT 18, 2013

1. There's no right answer to the question, "Honey, do these jeans make my butt look big?"
    a. Every comic who ever took a stab at it owes a debt of gratitude to the First Family of Judaism, and to God, who covered that ground for the very first time, and got some serious laughs, in this week's Torah portion, Vayera (Genesis 18:1–22:24).
2. The story is pretty well-known.
    a. Abraham had welcomed three weary travelers to his home
    b. fixed them a delicious meal.
    c. As they ate their meal, this transpired:
3. *They said to him, "Where is your wife Sarah?" And he replied, "There, in the tent." Then one said, "I will return to you next year, and your wife Sarah shall have a son!" Sarah was listening at the entrance of the tent, which was behind him. Now Abraham and Sarah were old, advanced in years; Sarah had stopped having the periods of women. And Sarah laughed to herself, saying, "Now that I am withered, am I to have enjoyment—with my husband so old?" Then the Lord said to Abraham, "Why did Sarah laugh, saying, 'Shall I in truth bear a child, old as I am?' Is anything too wondrous for the Lord? I will return to you at the time next year, and Sarah shall have a son." Sarah lied, saying, "I did not laugh," for she was frightened. But He replied, "You did laugh" (Genesis 18:9-15, emphasis added).*
4. Sarah laughs at the idea that Abraham could possibly bring her that sort of satisfaction — the kind that results in childbirth — in his old age.
    a. But in reporting Sarah's thoughts to Abraham, God lets go of the truth in favor of a kindness.
    b. Knowing that there's about as much upside to Abraham hearing of Sarah's assessment of his fertility as there is to answering the "jeans question" honestly, God bends the truth.
    c. Abraham is told is that Sarah's laughter came about at her own expense, and not his.
5. **God, to put it rather plainly, lies.**
    a. But it's a lie with a higher purpose.

    b. God puts Abraham's feelings first, even before the truth.
6. The Hebrew expression for such a statement is ***emet shel chesed***, a "kind and loving 'truth.'"
    a. Telling such "truths" is commended in the Jewish tradition, particularly when relationship satisfaction is on the line.
7. These "little white lies" are the subject of one of the debates between the schools of Hillel and Shammai.
    a. What do you say to a less-than-stunning bride on her wedding day?
        i. The school of Shammai holds tight the the principle of truth-telling: call it like you see it.
        ii. The school of Hillel is kinder and more diplomatic, teaching that "every bride is beautiful on her wedding day."
            1. Any guess as to which school got more dates?
8. Related to the ***emet shel chesed*** is the concept of ***sh'lom bayit,*** or "Peace in the Home."
    a. How important is sh'lom bayit? The Rabbis understand God to be willing to even allow the blotting out of the Divine Name in order to save a marriage
    b. Ego — even the divine Ego — ought not stand in the way of loving partners finding their way back to right relationship.
9. May we all find a way to speak in kindness and to get our own egos out of the way, that our homes and our relationships may be dwellings of peace and love. And may we answer the question like our teacher, Hillel: "You look beautiful in those jeans….from head to toe."