

WISDOM OR DECEPTION

by Rabbi Daniel Travis

"And your brother came with wisdom and took your blessing." (Bereshith 27:35)

The translation of the word - *mirma* as "wisdom" is somewhat unexpected, for *mirma* generally implies deception¹. Yitzchak was unaware that Yaakov had been instructed to take the blessings through Divine prophecy, and had no way of knowing that his son had not acted with guile. What prompted Yitzchak to label this seeming underhandedness an act of intelligence?

Equally puzzling is the Torah's description of Yaakov as an *Ish Tam*, a phrase which carries the dual meanings of "lacking guile" and "uncompromisingly honest." At first glance, neither description seems appropriate. How can Yaakov be described in this way when throughout his life, whenever he came in contact with crooked individuals, he consistently found a clever, non-straightforward way to defend himself from being swindled? As a result, he does not always come across as truthful, for at times he had to employ shrewdness in order to protect himself.

The answers to these questions can be found in a verse in Mishlei which describes the Torah as follows: "I am wisdom, dwell with cunning, and find out knowledge of evil intentions²." The message of these words is striking. The Torah bestows upon those who study it unremittingly the insight to safeguard themselves from corrupt individuals who may try to take advantage of them. Their ability to defend themselves in this way does not contradict the Torah's fundamental and uncompromising dedication to absolute truth. Therefore Yaakov's course of action was in total harmony with his straightforward nature. In no way does it suggest even the slightest taint of deceptiveness, for it stemmed completely from the erudition and wisdom that Yaakov had acquired through years of toiling in Torah³.

However, like other sections of the Torah, this wisdom has very precise qualifications. Such behavior is only appropriate in the rare instances when (as in the case of Yaakov), in order to fulfill the Torah, there is clearly no other option than to act with cunning. Even then, the Torah lays down exact parameters of what is permitted and what is forbidden. Only someone well versed in these laws is capable of deciding when such conduct is permissible. Anyone who oversteps these guidelines has transgressed the will of the Torah.

One of these criteria is derived from the way that the Torah phrases the prohibition against lying: "From a word of falsehood you should distance yourself⁴." In every situation, barring none, one must

distance himself as much as humanly possible from any iota of falsehood⁵. Yitzchak recognized that Yaakov had gone to extreme pains to act in complete accord with the Torah's parameters of truthfulness. It was therefore clear to him that his son's behavior stemmed entirely from the wisdom of the Torah, and not from a selfish desire to take the blessings for himself.

Therefore, in this instance "wisdom" is an accurate translation of the word "*mirma*," since Yaakov's actions were in no way the result of a dishonest impulse, but were purely a reflection of the wisdom that he had acquired through his study of Torah⁶.

Footnotes:

¹ According to the translation of Onkeloth.

² Mishlei 8:12.

³ According to the commentary of the Vilna Gaon on Bereshith 27:35.

⁴ Shemoth 23:7.

⁵ See essays entitled "Keep Your Distance II and III," (pp.111 and 113) on Bereshith 20:12.

⁶ Heard from Rav Aryeh Kruskal. See article entitled "An Eye For Deception," (page 237) on Bereshith 34:13 for a similar application of this concept.