

DON'T BE DECEIVED, OR DECEITFUL

by Rabbi Yaakov Menken

"And the children grew; and Esav was a man who knew how to trap, a man of the fields, but Yaakov was a simple man, a dweller in tents." [25:27]

Esav had no interest in the Jewish path of his father and grandfather, their path of spiritual growth. On the contrary, he was an idolator and murderer! It was Yaakov who was destined to father the Jewish nation.

The commentator Rashi (Rabbi Shlomo Yitzchaki, 11th C. CE) explains a further contrast between Esav and Yaakov.

Esav hid his true attitude and behavior from his father, and deceived him. He even asked his father how one tithes salt or straw (which need not be tithed), in order to convince Yitzchak that he was careful to perform the Commandments.

Yaakov, on the other hand, was the paragon of honesty. He was called "simple" by the Torah -- "like his heart was his mouth." Rashi explains that a person who is not sharp or deceitful enough to engage in chicanery is called "simple."

The Chozeh MiLublin, the "Seer of Lublin," sees a contradiction between this description of Yaakov, and Rashi's own comment on a later verse:

"And Yaakov told Rachel that he was her father's (Lavan's) brother, that he was a son of Rivkah, and she ran and told this to her father." [29:12]

Yaakov was her father's nephew, not brother, but the word need not be taken literally; Avraham described himself as a "brother" to his nephew Lot as well. But in addition, Rashi quotes a Medrash that tells us that Yaakov was saying: "if he is coming to cheat me, I am his brother in trickery, but if he is a righteous person, then I too am the son of Rivkah his sister, who is righteous."

Asks the Chozeh: how can this be? Rashi himself said that Yaakov was called "simple," meaning that he was incapable of trickery. Was he a simple man, or was he the equal of Lavan in trickery and deceit?

And as we know, this is not the only time Yaakov fools someone. Here we could also ask, how could such an honest man steal the blessings of his brother? How could he evade Yitzchak's questions with answers that skirted the truth?

Our Sages say in the Medrash: "any person who makes himself merciful in a place where he needs to be cruel, will in the end be cruel in a situation where he should be merciful." This, says the Chozeh MiLublin, is the answer to our question. A person needs to control every characteristic.

Sometimes a person needs to behave one way, and sometimes the exact opposite -- but in all cases for the sake of Heaven.

This, he says, is what the verse means when it describes Yaakov as a "simple man." Yaakov was not merely simple, but a man as well. He was the master of his traits; he could conquer his nature when necessary.

This was Yaakov's great test. Just as his grandfather Avraham, who was so kind, needed to give up his kindness to sacrifice his son Yitzchak, Yaakov had to give up his tremendous honesty. He had to be willing to tarnish his credentials.

How do we know that Yaakov passed? I believe that the greatest indicator is how he awoke the next morning. Perhaps his credentials were tarnished in the eyes of man, but he remained exactly as honest as he had been before. When he was in a situation where his survival and the future of the Jewish People did not require deceit, he once again avoided it like a deadly poison.

Sometimes, we too are put in situations that require behavior we ordinarily should avoid. The question is how we allow it to affect us afterwards.

Think about the current war in Israel. Israel cannot "be merciful in a place where it needs to be cruel." If it fails to blockade terrorist enclaves like Jenin, Jews will be murdered. Yet at the same time, we cannot merely pay lip service to the fact that innocents are caught in the middle.

Every life experience is a test. This is one of ours. Even while Israel does what it must to preserve the lives of our brethren, we must genuinely desire -- and pray -- for peace.

Good Shabbos,

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