

THE TRUTH OF DECEIT

by Rabbi Aron Tendler

Tales of prophecies, divinations, manipulations and conspiracies fill this week's Parsha. Yaakov had escaped the wrath of Eisav only to find that he had gone from the frying pan into the fire. Lavan, the master of deception was interested in only one thing, the perversion or if need be, the destruction of Yaakov. This was not a simple matter of a devious and evil uncle desiring power or wealth. This was a battle between titans for the soul of humanity.

Why did this profoundly important and historic challenge have to be fought through deceit? Why did Yaakov have to be trained by Rivkah to recognize and combat deception with deception? Why couldn't there have been an open engagement between Yaakov's truth and Lavan's falsehood? Why did the final open confrontation between Lavan and Yaakov first take place after all the 12 tribes had either been born or conceived?

Ninety-seven years earlier, the young Lavan and his father Bisuel attempted to kill Eliezar, the servant of Avraham (Rashi 24:55) Why? Their reason for doing so was that they did not want Yitzchak to marry Rivkah. By interfering with the next stage of Jewish nationality, they would be able to stop G-d from being proclaimed and known in the world. They would be able to persist in defining their own morals and values without concern for G-d. Whether or not they fully understood the stakes involved is difficult to say. However, they certainly knew that Avraham and his descendents were monotheistic and determined to teach their beliefs to the rest of humanity. They, in turn, were determined to stop them from doing so.

The teachings of Avraham had already caused great stirrings and conflicts. Avraham and his two brothers, Nachor and Haran, grew to adulthood during the reign of Nimrod and the building of the Tower of Babel. Nimrod claimed to be divine and the civilized world supported his claim. Avraham was the only one to openly challenge Nimrod. Nachor, on the other hand, was fully invested in the theological debate of the times and supported Nimrod. Haran, the third brother, was caught between the other two and wavered in his resolve from side to side.

The incident with the fiery furnace took place when Nimrod entered the fray. Nachor wanted his brother to die in the fiery furnace. Instead, Haran died and Avraham miraculously emerged victorious and more influential than before. Nimrod, on the other hand was publicly humiliated. Worse of all was Nimrod's own son resigning his prince hood and subjugating himself to Avraham and his teachings. Eliezar the servant of Avraham was the son of Nimrod.

Nachor's hatred for Avraham grew with Avraham's fame. The greater Avraham became the more Nachor hated him. Nachor was determined to do everything possible to undermine Avraham's mission. It is possible that part of the hatred had been fueled by Terach's fall from grace. Terach, Avraham and Nachor's father, had been Nimrod's right hand man. It was due to Avraham's birth and his subsequent challenge to Nimrod's divinity that Terach was demoted from his illustrious position. Nachor might have deeply resented Avraham for the loss of what he may have considered his personal right and destiny.

Nachor imparted his hatred for Avraham and his teachings to his children and grandchildren. Bisuel and Lavan were the products of that education. Bisuel died when he attempted to kill Eliezar, and Lavan fully embraced his father and grandfather's mandate to oppose and destroy Avraham's descendents. The method which Nachor, Bisuel, and Lavan employed in battling Avraham was deceit. They did not confront Avraham or his descendents directly. At first, they hid behind the throne of Nimrod. Even after the miracle of the fiery furnace, Nimrod attempted to kill or imprison Avraham. However, Avraham managed to escape all the attempts and conspiracies. With the destruction of the Tower of Babel Nimrod's power began to wane and soon enough Nachor was on his own in plotting Avraham's destruction.

My understanding of Nachor's methods suggests a profound recognition on his part as to how G-d would be revealed to the world. It was clear to Nachor that if openly challenged G-d would do miracles. An open rebellion against G-d is the greatest opportunity for sanctifying or desecrating G-d's name. (Kiddush or Chillul Hashem). So long as there is no one to champion good and oppose evil, G-d remains hidden within the workings of nature and history. However, whenever a champion arises to defend G-d, assuming that the champion is truly "for the sake of heaven" G-d will openly respond. Therefore, Nachor and his descendents decided to resort to indirect methods for undermining G-d and His servants.

In fact, the indirect method became societies greatest tool against the Jew. The Jew has always survived the direct challenges of inquisitions and pogroms. It is the indirect methods of assimilation that have done the greatest damage to us.

In the lifetime of Nachor there were two instances when G-d openly revealed His presence. Avraham, being saved from the fiery furnace and the destruction of the Tower of Babel. In both instances, there had been an open confrontation with G-d. In the instance of the fiery furnace Avraham was the obvious champion. In the story of the Tower of Babel, Nimrod had rallied the world against G-d. Therefore, even-though there was no one identified champion, G-d had to intervene. With Avraham, His intervention was openly miraculous, seeming to defy the laws of nature. With the tower of Babel, because there wasn't a champion, G-d utilized nature to destroy the tower, disperse the people and thwart Nimrod's plans.

Nachor witnessed these events and gleaned a basic understanding of G-d's methods. Therefore,

Nachor decided to avoid direct confrontation with Avraham and G-d and taught his descendents the ways of deceit and trickery. Those were his only hope for successfully battling G-d.

Nachor's understanding went even deeper. Nachor recognized that in the aftermath of the sin of Adam and Chava, G-d would only reveal Himself openly if forced to do so. Gan Eden was the way the world might have functioned if Adam and Chava had not sinned. G-d's presence would have been openly manifest in the workings of nature, and prophecy would have been either unnecessary or commonplace. Once Adam and Chava sinned and they were exiled from Gan Eden, G-d secreted Himself within the workings of nature and history.

As a whole, the world was not deserving of G-d's manifest presence. Therefore, the only ways to learn about G-d were to personally discover Him (like Avraham had) or to be taught that He existed (like Avraham did). However, there was a third way. If G-d would be openly challenged, G-d might do a miracle, and miracles openly proclaim G-d's existence.

As far as Nachor was concerned, any method that proclaimed G-d's existence had to be avoided at all costs. Miracles would allow others, such as what happened to Eliezar, to discover G-d on their own; therefore, open confrontation had to be avoided. Avraham's teachings would continue to make converts for as long as Avraham and Sarah lived. However, once they died, Nachor was convinced that their teachings would die with them. Nachor was very successful in enlisting Bisuel and Lavan in his cause. They too became committed to using deception to undermine Avraham, and avoid miracles by avoiding open confrontation with G-d. So long as Avraham and Sarah had no children, Nachor, Bisuel and Lavan were able to relax and focus on themselves. Once Yitzchak was born, the situation changed. Therefore, when the occasion arose to kill Eliezar and undermine Yitzchak's marriage to Rivkah, Bisuel and Lavan attempted it. First of all, the death of Eliezar the son of Nimrod was a worthy enough prize. Secondly, they could interfere with the next stage of Jewish nationality. Of course, they did not do so directly. They only used deceit and trickery.

With the birth of Yaakov and Eisav, Lavan again saw his long awaited opportunity to destroy the children of Avraham. Rashi (29:17) references the Medresh that explains why Leah's eyes were weak, or red from crying. "Everyone use to say, Lavan had two daughters and Rivkah had two sons. The older daughter (Leah) for the older son (Eisav) and the younger daughter (Rachel) for the younger son (Yaakov)." The idea of marrying someone like Eisav was so reprehensible to Leah that she cried all the time. Lavan, on the other hand, knew that Yitzchak would eventually turn to his family when looking to marry off his sons, just as Avraham had done. In time, he would be given the opportunity to pervert or destroy the next generation of Jews.

The Parsha details Lavan's numerous attempts at undermining Yaakov's and G-d's intentions. Of course, it was all done with deceit and deception. Open confrontation and miracles had to be avoided at all costs. Therefore, Lavan first switches Leah for Rachel, and then does everything in his power to keep Yaakov from returning to the protection of Yitzchak and Rivkah.

At the end of the 20 years, after the first twelve children had been born (including Dina) Lavan chases after Yaakov and openly confronts him! Why? If our understanding of Lavan's methods is true, why didn't Yaakov turn the tables on Lavan and force more confrontations, thereby eliciting more miracles? Why did Rivkah train Yaakov to buy into Nachor's deceitful agenda?

As explained before, following Gan Eden G-d secreted Himself within the workings of nature and history. Except for some rare occasions, G-d did not perform open miracles. This means that miracles are not the best way to get to know G-d. In fact, miracles alone never had a lasting affect on anyone. Miracles in conjunction with a lifestyle of commitment and responsibility can be very powerful. The reason is that the most effective way for teaching about G-d is by modeling a lifestyle that naturally weaves an awareness of G-d into everything that we do. Had we not sinned with the Tree of Knowledge, Nature would have revealed G-d's presence. Once we sinned, we had to reveal His presence.

The purpose of exposing G-d's actuality is to teach the other nations and carry on Avraham's teachings. In order to do so we had to become more than just Avraham and Sarah, more than just Yitzchak and Rivkah. We had to become a family. We had to become a nation. A nation that believes in G-d and lives accordingly is far more powerful than the individual who believes in G-d.

So long as all the children had not been born, Yaakov could not claim to be a nation, Yaakov was not Shalaim - whole. (28:21). Once the family was complete, the nation was on its way. (The fulfillment of Lech Lecha). (As to why Binyamin was not yet born is another discussion.) As a nation, Yaakov could expect miracles. As a functioning family miracles would be woven into a lifestyle of belief and performance. Therefore, Yaakov felt empowered to leave Lavan and return to Eretz Yisroel.

On the other hand, once Yaakov had escaped, Lavan became desperate. His last chance at fulfilling Nachor's mandate was to physically catch and destroy the infant nation. Lavan even risked open confrontation and possible miracle. However, as we know, G-d privately confronted Lavan in a dream and thereby prevented the danger to Yaakov and his family.

The truth is that once the Bnai Yisroel were born G-d did reveal Himself openly to the world. The greatest revelation and miracle in history is the existence of the Jewish nation, the Bnai Yisroel.

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