

A RESPECTED MASTER OF DECEPTION

by Rabbi Yissocher Frand

These divrei Torah were adapted from the hashkafa portion of Rabbi Yissocher Frand's Commuter Chavrusah Tapes on the weekly portion: #1009 - Sheva Brachos Questions. Good Shabbos!

Analyzing Yaakov's Claim That He Was Lavan's "Brother"

The *pesukim* in this week's parsha say, "And it was, when Yaakov saw Rochel, daughter of Lavan, his mother's brother, and the flock of Lavan, his mother's brother, Yaakov came forward and rolled the stone from upon the mouth of the well and watered the sheep of Lavan, his mother's brother. Then Yaakov kissed Rochel; and he raised his voice and wept. Yaakov told Rochel that **he was her father's brother**, and that he was Rivka's son; then she ran and told her father." [Bereishis 29:10-12].

Rashi comments on the implication of the message that "he was her father's brother" (when in fact Yaakov was Lavan's nephew, not his brother). In his first comment (at the level of simple interpretation), Rashi says that the term "brother" merely means relative, as in the expression "we are men who are brothers" [Bereishis 13:8] (which Avraham said to Lot, even though there, too, Lot was Avraham's nephew).

In his second comment (at the level of Medrashic interpretation), Rashi says that Yaakov was saying, "If he comes for deceit, I am his brother in deceit; but if he is a decent person, I am also the son of Rivka, his decent sister." In other words, apparently Yaakov was telling Rochel that he was prepared to go tit for tat, punch for punch, toe to toe against anything her father Lavan was prepared to throw at him.

This appears to be a very strange comment by Rashi. Baruch Hashem, I have the privilege of teaching young men who are in the stage in life when they are seeking appropriate marriage partners. Many times a young man who is beginning to date comes to me for advice on how to conduct himself on a first date.

The first thing I might tell such young men is not to be embarrassed to say, "I need to use the bathroom." After that, I might suggest what to do and what to discuss. I never ever tell a young man, "On the first date, do not ever say to the girl 'your father is a swindler and I can match him in

deceitfulness."

This comment of Rashi is amazing. Yaakov is meeting Rochel for the first time. He has barely had time to say "*Shalom Aleichem*" and the first thing that comes out of his mouth (according to the Medrashic interpretation given by Rashi) is, "I am as big a swindler as your father is!" What is the meaning behind this inexplicable comment?

The other problem with this statement is that if we read the ongoing story, we see how Lavan actually swindled Yaakov repeatedly. Yaakov, in fact, complains later to his wives that Lavan had switched his salary ten times (according to the Medrash it was a lot more than ten times), trying to undercut his advantage each time. The whole time, Yaakov never reacted to Lavan's deception. What happened to his bravado that "I can go toe to toe with your father in deception?"

Yaakov seems to take Lavan's abuse lying down. If I were Yaakov, I would have walked away from Lavan the first time he cheated me. Yaakov stayed in this abusive environment for twenty years, without ever pulling a fast one on his father-in-law in retribution for all of Lavan's trickery. On the contrary, he was an extremely loyal and extremely dedicated employee throughout! Yaakov acted throughout like the "Tam" he was -- a naïve *Yeshiva bochur* who was repeatedly manipulated by his uncle/father-in-law. Yaakov's statement to Rochel that "I am your father's brother in trickery" seems to be nothing more than a bluff.

I heard an amazing interpretation from the current Tolner Rebbe of Jerusalem, based on a Gemara [Bava Basra 89b] that discusses the prohibition of making measuring utensils in ways which could lead to deception. The Gemara elucidates; if you make it this way, the seller can cheat the buyer, if you make it this other way, the buyer can cheat the seller. After an extensive technical discussion about the matter, the Gemara states: "Rabbi Yochanan ben Zakkai says, concerning all of the above, 'Woe to me if I reveal the halacha, and woe to me if I don't reveal the halacha'."

The Gemara explains Rabbi Yochanan's dilemma. If he reveals the details (of what should not be done because it could lead to cheating) it will benefit the thieves (who may learn new ways to cheat); and if he does not reveal it, the thieves will think that the Rabbis are not onto their methods of deception, and will continue to try to fool them.

The Gemara then asks what the bottom line was: Did Rabbi Yochanan reveal the halacha or did he not reveal it? The Gemara concludes that he did reveal it, based on the following *pasuk*: "...the ways of Hashem are straight; the righteous will walk in them, and the sinner will stumble over them." [Hoshea 14:10]. This is the nature of Torah. Torah can be a potion of life, or it can be a poison of death. Torah knowledge can be used for righteous purposes, or it can be used for evil purposes. The righteous use their Torah knowledge for righteousness, and the wicked use it for evil.

The Tolner Rebbe notes that Rabbi Yochanan was hesitant to remain silent, lest the thieves think that Torah scholars are naïve and unaware of the tricks of the trade of the wicked. The Tolner Rebbe points out a universal human character trait: When I meet another person, the thing that will impress

me most about him is if I think he understands my business well. If I am in real estate or some other business, yes I can have respect for the Rav, or the Rosh Yeshiva, or the Rebbe. But if I go into that person and see that he knows real estate just as well as I do, then I have tremendous extra respect and *derech erez* for him.

I am greatly impressed when I see someone else who has expertise as great as my own -- or perhaps even greater -- in a field that I understand well. If a doctor goes into a Rav with a medical *shaylah*, and he sees that the Rav knows medicine as well as he does, he is very impressed with that Rav.

Rabbi Yochanon ben Zakkai was afraid that the swindlers would have no connection whatsoever with the Rabbonim. They would have total contempt for Rabbis who spend their entire time sitting in the Beis Medrash bent over pages of the Talmud. Rabbi Yochanon ben Zakkai said, "I want to show the robbers that I know how to swindle as well as they do. That will impress them. Then they will respect me. We never know. Maybe the swindler will be lost, but if he has *derech erez* for the wisdom of *Rabbonim*, maybe it will have a subtle positive impact on his children, and they will come back.

Rabbi Yochanon's message was, "I want to have a connection with every type of Jew -- even a thief, even a robber!" The fact that I daven a long *Shmoneh Esrei*, or that I know every Tosfos in Shas will not overly impress a thief. This is not "currency" with which thieves will be overawed. What is "currency" by the thieves? It is when I know the tools of their trade.

What does this teaching in Bava Basra have to do with our parsha? Rav Chaim Vital writes in the *Sefer haGilgulim* that Rav Yochanon ben Zakkai was a "*Gilgul*" (transmigrated soul) of Yaakov Avinu. With this bit of (mystical) insight, we can better understand the comment of Rashi regarding Yaakov's boast to Rochel.

Yaakov meets Rochel for the first time and tells her, "I am your father's brother in trickery." This is not to say, "I intend to swindle him." Yaakov never swindled Lavan. Yaakov was not the type to swindle. However, Yaakov was telling Rochel, "I want you to know that your father is going to respect me. He is not going to respect me because I learned in the Yeshiva of Shem v'Ever for 14 years without sleeping one night. That does not mean anything to him. Rather, he will be impressed that I am as shrewd and insightful into the ways of thievery as he is. He will respect me, and therefore maybe I will have a chance to have a positive influence on him!"

Yaakov wanted to improve Lavan. That was the hidden message behind "I am his brother." This explains why, throughout the entire parsha, when Lavan tricks Yaakov left, right, and center, Yaakov does not retaliate. "I am his brother in swindling" only means "I know the ways of swindling" -- not that I intend to use them. Heaven forbid that I should actually engage in thievery.

The Rambam writes (in Igros HaRambam), "that which our Rabbis interpreted 'I am his brother in deception' only means he could demonstrate it to Lavan once or twice. However, deception

becomes addictive. Once someone gets into the practice, it becomes second nature to him. It is a slippery slope. Once someone begins to descend it, it is very hard to stop. Yaakov merely stated that he knew the profession. He never intended to use it. However, Lavan could not stop himself. He was a compulsive swindler who could not act otherwise.

The Sefarim state that each of the Avos had his own attribute. Avraham's attribute was *Chessed* [Kindness]; Yitzchak possessed the attribute of *Din* [Judgment]; and Yaakov's attribute was *Emes* [Truth]. If we review the Torah portions of the recent weeks, we notice that Hashem tested each of the patriarchs in the area of their special attribute. They were tested in their area of spiritual expertise, and they each passed their test, thereby taking their mastery of this spiritual attribute to an even higher level.

Avraham was the master of *Chessed*. He had to be prepared to slaughter his son. The Gemara in Shabbos says that Hashem threatened to wipe out Klal Yisrael, and it was Yitzchak who stepped forward and made a deal with G-d and argued for compassion towards Israel. Avraham and Yaakov were silent here; Yitzchak, in an out-of-character moment, pleaded that Hashem should mitigate *Din*, and he was the one who became the savior of the nation. Yaakov Avinu, whose attribute was Truth, had to "steal the blessings" of his father and struggle with Lavan in an atmosphere of falsehood for twenty years. He had to bring out the attribute of truth to a new, higher level.

"I am his brother in thievery" does not mean he intended to cheat Lavan. That would be a contradiction to his entire essence. It means, "I know the profession; your father will respect me. I can hopefully have an influence over him, because I am "in charge" when it comes to deception, not your father."

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This week's write-up is adapted from the hashkafa portion of Rabbi Yissochar Frand's Commuter Chavrusah Series on the weekly Torah portion. A listing of the halachic portions for Parshas Vayetzei is provided below:

- # 032 - The Obligation to Give Ma'aser
- # 074 - Honoring Parents Who Are Not Observant
- # 123 - Tefilla B'tzibur: Is It Mandatory?
- # 170 - Marrying Off a Younger Child First
- # 216 - Maariv
- # 260 - "Ein Mearvin Simcha B'Simcha"
- # 306 - Making a Neder During Times of Trouble

- # 350 - Must Women Daven?
- # 394 - Accepting Tzedaka from Women
- # 438 - The Mitzvah of Mesameach Chasan V'Kallah
- # 482 - Davening to a Malach
- # 526 - A Million Dollars to Tzadaka If ..
- # 570 - Tuition and Maaser Money
- # 614 - The Tefilah of Baruch Hashem L'Olam Omein V'Omein
- # 658 - Lashon Aramis - Aramaic
- # 702 - The Marriage that Was Not a Joke
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- # 922 - Too Much Tzedakah?
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- #1053 - The Younger Brother Who Says "I'm Getting Married First"
- #1096 - Davening With A Minyan - Obligation Or Just A Good Idea?
- #1139 - Can The Younger Brother Marry Before His Older Sister?
- #1182 - Chasan Going To Work During Sheva Brochos / Leaving Chasunah Early
- #1226 - Why Was Rochel Punished for Stealing Her Father's Idols?
- #1270 - "It's Just Too Hard": Is That an Excuse Not to Fulfill a Mitzvah?

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