

Vayatzay davar Torah

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Shabbat shalom. My name is Stephanie Listokin.

The parsha -- Vayatzay -- contains many well-known stories of Yakov, who, at the start of the parsha, is now making his way to Charan to avoid his brother Esav. In Toldot, last week's parsha, Yakov tricked his brother Esav not once, but twice, to obtain his older brother's birthright and blessing. Esav is so angry about this, he is practically murderous toward his brother, and so their mother Rivkah counsels Yakov to hit the road and travel far away for both his safety and to find a proper wife.

When Yakov finally arrives in Charan, he finds the people he is looking for, namely his family, the house of his uncle Lavan. Yakov settles in and begins to follow through on the additional purpose of this journey, namely to find a wife among his own people. After Yakov had stayed with Lavan for a month, Lavan says to Yakov: Just because you are my kinsman, should you work for me for nothing? What should be your wages?

Yakov then says his response to Lavan's question with very specific and intentional wording,

אֶעֱבֹדְךָ שִׁבְעַ שָׁנִים, בְּרַחֵל בְּתוּךָ, הַקְטָנָה.

I will serve you for seven years if, I can marry Rachel, your daughter, the younger.

Many commentators have noted that there was no need for the extra explanation of who Rachel was, so why the extra verbiage? The extra verbiage is there because Yakov was making a point. He was directly identifying that he knows, and Lavan knows, that Rachel was YOUNGER, that this may not have been the natural order of things, and that this was the proposal. Yakov wanted Rachel's hand in marriage not Leah's.

Remember: Just like Rachel, Yakov is also the younger of 2 siblings, and

Yakov had to act quite cunningly, deceptively to obtain the privileges intended for his older sibling Esav. Yakov is now making crystal clear his demand as he daringly asks to marry the younger daughter and not the older one who is equally available and traditionally privileged above the younger.

Lavan replies in a rather cryptic and illusive manner. He doesn't say yes or no, he says to Yakov, "Better that I should give her to you than that I should give her to an outsider. Stay with me."

טוב נתתי אתה לך, מנתתי אתה, לאיש אחר; שבה, עמדי

Yakov then labors for 7 years, erroneously believing he has a firm and clear arrangement with Lavan. When the 7 years are up, Yakov proactively steps forward to remind Lavan that the time has come for him to marry Rachel. So, Lavan gathers the townspeople and makes a feast. When it is night, Lavan brings Leah to marry Yakov instead of Rachel. It is only the next morning when he realizes the switch, and he asks Lavan, "Why did you deceive me?" Lavan replies, "my tradition is not to marry the younger daughter before the older one. If you wait one week, then you can marry Rachel too, but afterward you will need to work for me for another seven years." Yakov goes along with this new proposal, marries Rachel the following week, and now has two wives when he had only been hoping for one. He continues to work for Lavan for another 7 years.

I find striking the noteworthy parallels between Yakov's trick in Toldot and Lavan's trick in Vayatzay. In both cases, someone deceives a close family member. Both cases involve what I would call an unexpected "identity switcheroo". First, the father is tricked by the son. And then, the son is tricked, in a perfect karmic circle. The deception in both cases is of a very similar kind, and quite honestly, hard to believe. It involves someone not being able to physically recognize someone else -- who they are relationally close to (father and son, or cousins living under the same roof for 7 years).

And the person that they cannot recognize is physically close to them, so much so, we're not just talking about being inches away, but skin on skin. In the first trick, Yitzak somehow believes goat fur feels just like his eldest child. In the second, Yakov spends the night with Leah and yet he can't

distinguish her from Rachel, who he has loved and wanted for 7 years. It's perplexing.

What is most notable to me though about Yakov getting tricked into marrying Leah is: Karma. Karma is the destiny that you earn through your own actions and behavior. Or, in other words, a force which causes a person to reap what they sow; Karma is a Sanskrit term, and this concept is found in Hindu and Buddhist tradition.

But there is also a very similar concept in our tradition. We have the phrase "middah k'negged middah" which loosely translates as "measure for measure" or "what comes around goes around". For example, in Pirkei Avot 2:6 א:ב, we find that the sage Hillel discovered a skull floating in the water and said, "Because you drowned others, you were drowned, and in the end, those who drowned you, will be drowned."

Yakov gets his comeuppance. Karma, or "Middah k'negged middah," delivers to Yakov what he did to his own father and brother. In both cases, the trickery seems reprehensible and at the same time, the outcomes of these deceptive actions are viewed as the positive and purposeful destiny of Hashem. We believe that Yakov was meant to be a patriarch of the Jewish people and that Rachel and Leah were meant to be our Matriarchs, the two of them together giving birth to the 12 tribes. How do we reconcile this?

Rabbi Shai Held of Yeshivat Hadar tries to answer this question in his book "The Heart of Torah." He acknowledges that the outcomes may have been desirable, or even essential, but the way the actors achieved their ends was unacceptable, morally reprehensible.

Rabbi Held imagines that the Yakov might have found ways to morally justify his own trick: Esav is a problematic character and maybe Yakov thinks his brother deserves what he gets. The Torah describes his mother Rivkah as the chief instigator and schemer behind Yakov's deception to obtain Esav's blessing from Yakov. Perhaps Yakov feels he is only fulfilling his mother's wishes.

But Rabbi Held emphasizes that Jewish ethics is unequivocal. Sacred ends do not justify crooked means. This is why Yakov must suffer middah k'negged middah. Shai Held writes: Most of us are not intentional rulebreakers when we go stray, we do not think "I know this is wrong and I don't care." We are not brazen sinners. We rationalize and justify our actions. But ultimately you cannot spin yourself out of moral responsibility. Yakov learns this the hard way.

Shabbat Shalom.