

The Path of Deception

Our Sages, as is well known, long ago reminded us that good deeds, and malign ones, do not exist in a vacuum. As the adage goes, “a mitzvah begets yet another mitzvah”, and the converse maintains as well. Typically, we understand this dictum as primarily concerning the personal plane; through performance of a mitzvah, a person habituates himself to proper conduct, and ultimately, a life filled with constructive activities. Conversely, an individual who lets his guard down, even temporarily, risks the formation of the opposite qualities and habits, ultimately leading to a spiritually dessicate mode of existence.

Yet, in this week’s Parshah, we understand a second dimension of this particular adage. Yaakov’s deception of his father (and it should be emphasized, he did so only at the command of his mother- yet, in the end, he did do it), immediately begets a pattern of deception that defines the entire Torah portion.

Yaakov, deceiver of his father, drinks from that bitter cup of dissemblance in the opening of the Parshah, as his beloved Rachel is substituted for Leah. When, the next morning, he cries out plaintively to his father-in-law, why have you deceived me, he is met with the cold and biting remark, “it is not done in our place, that the younger goes before the older.” The reference is so biting, so cutting, that it needs no elaboration.

The deception continues. Yaakov works for Esav with uncompromising honesty and integrity, and yet, Lavan changes his terms of employment constantly, as Yaakov explodes at the end of the Torah portion, “you have changed my wages ten times!”.

The deception continues. Rather than have a direct, albeit very difficult, conversation with his father-in-law, Yaakov waits for an opportune moment, when Lavan has gone on an ancient version of the business trip (to shear his sheep), and absconds with the entire family. For all of Lavan’s deceit, we have to remember that Yaakov was taking the man’s daughters and grandchildren, and owed the man, at the very least, a conversation.

The deception continues, and this time, in ensnares Rachel as well. Whatever her motivation, Rachel steals objects clearly precious to her father, without Yaakov’s knowledge. When confronted about the behavior, she again lies about it, claiming that she cannot rise off the camel for feminine reasons. Our Sages associate this deception with her early demise, in next week’s Torah portion.

The Torah’s message is unmistakable. A single act of dishonesty or dissemblance may seem, in the broader scheme, innocuous. Nothing could be further from the truth. On the contrary, deceit

ensnares us. Yaakov's deception of his father comes to define the next two decades of his life, in the home of the deceiver par excellence, Lavan. *Mi-Devar Sheker Tirchak*, the Torah taught us in Sefer Mishpatim. It is not enough not to lie. We must actively distance ourselves from all deception.