

Emet L'Yaakov, Chessed L'Avraham: A Developmental Perspective

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Parshat Toldot is a transitional one, in which the primary focus of the Chumash switches between the second and third of the Avot, from Yitzchak to Yaakov. For the next three parshiyot, until the central drama shifts to the interactions between Yosef and his brothers, Yaakov Avinu represents the critical figure in the text.

Chazal, as we know, have associated Yaakov with the characteristic of truth¹, תתן אמת ליעקב, just as his father is associated with courage, גבורה, and his grandfather with the virtue of kindness, חסד². *Ab initio*, the association seems strange. After all, the central incident of our sedra is one in which Yaakov, much to his own discomfort, deceives his own father. As Yitzchak himself notes to a crestfallen Esav, במרמה ויקח ברכתך³, בא אחיך. Even if Yaakov was not the one to initiate this decision, even if he was uncomfortable with it, and even if it was, in a sense, כיבוד אמ, his sheer willingness to engage in this kind of activity would seem to, in it of itself, disqualify him from association with the virtue of אמת.

Moving beyond this incident alone, Yaakov's wresting of the בכורה from his brother by exploiting his fatigue and hunger, as well as his handling of the division of the sheep with Lavan and his brothers- in- law in Parshat VaYetze, would hardly seem to be the actions of the archetype of truthfulness.

In fairness, one may certainly justify our Sages' association of truthfulness with Yaakov if one is willing to adopt a limited view which maintains that this association is rooted in the standards which Yaakov maintained as an employee in the House of Lavan. As Yaakov himself testifies to his own wives, the daughters of his employers, אתנה ידעתן כי בכל כחי עבדתי את אבינן⁴. To be sure, this aspect of Yaakov's integrity and rectitude is on full display in the coda of Rambam's Hilkhhot *Sechirut*⁵, in which Yaakov's honesty as an employee over two decades establishes the gold standard for the conduct of a hired laborer, and earns him the prestigious appellation of Yaakov Ha-Tzadik.

This impressive feature of Yaakov's persona integrity notwithstanding, one still yearns for a more holistic perspective on Chazal's identifying Yaakov's defining attribute as אמת. Perhaps,

¹ See, for example, Bereishit Rabbah 70:7.

² The prophetic root of this association can be found in Michah 7:20. In context, the reference to Yaakov is not a reflection on his personal honesty but rather a petition to the Almighty to fulfill the promise he made to Yaakov, as noted by Rashi, Ibn Ezra, Radak, and Metzudat David ad loc.

³ Bereishit 27:35. Admittedly, Onkelos and Rashi both take the edge off the term and simply render it בחכמה. Yet, it should not be lost on us that this is precisely the term which the Torah uses to describe the deception perpetrated by Yaaakov's sons (discussed below) on the people of Shechem, which so infuriated Yaakov. Moreover, this is precisely the term which Rambam (discussed below) chose in Hilkhhot Sekhirut, במרמה, נמוציא כל היום, as a contrast with the honesty of Yaakov as an employee of Lavan.

⁴ Bereishit 31:6.

⁵ Rambam Mishneh Torah Hilkhhot Sekhirut 13:7.

then, we might suggest that Yaakov's embodiment of the virtue of truth may indeed be best understood as a lifelong process of spiritual development, an evolution in his inner world.

In Parshat Toldot, Yaakov flees from his brother Esav, much as in Parshat VaYetze, Yaakov flees from his father in law, Lavan, rather than directly and honestly confront his erstwhile adversaries. As the Torah itself testifies, the latter was a clear example of deception, ויגנב יעקב, את לב לבן הארמי על בלי הגיד לו כי ברח הוא.⁶

Parshat VaYishlach represents the critical turning point. As Yaakov prepares for his confrontation with Esav, he is all alone. He must stand and struggle with the man-angel. In this confrontation, Yaakov loses his capacity to run, as his leg is injured. However, he has gained something far more important, the confidence that he need not run from his problems, or engage in any other form of machination, but that he can confront his adversaries honestly and directly. As we know, Yaakov's identity is transformed at this point to Yisrael, representing a transition between פעמים זה ויעקבני ישרות, honesty and integrity. And, even as he is wounded, in the physical sense of the term, and may no longer match the descriptive term of his youth, תם, he is now, ironically, even with his מום, so to speak, elevated to שלימות⁷.

From this point forward, Yaakov's life is marked inexorably by an unwavering commitment to direct and honest dealing even with the most difficult situations. When he meets Esav in the next chapter, he asks Esav to take back the blessing which he has gotten through deception, קח, נא את ברכתי אשר הבאת לך כי חנני אלוקים וכי יש לי כל.⁸ Critically, Yaakov does not run from Esav, but, on the contrary, confronts him directly, והוא עבר לפניו, and Yaakov goes directly to the front of his carefully choreographed encampment.

Likewise, in the difficult trials resulting from Dinah's abduction in Shechem, Yaakov excoriates his sons for engaging in מרמה, in deceptive plotting. While the simple reading of the Torah would indicate that Yaakov was primarily concerned about the practical implications of his sons' violence, ונאספו אלו והכוני ונשמדתי אני וביתי,⁹ the end of Sefer Bereishit tells a different story altogether¹⁰. As we know, Yaakov never truly forgives Shimon and Levi for their violent plot,

⁶ Bereishit 31:20.

⁷ Admittedly, Chazal do assert that שלימות reflects the healing of his wound, and therefore, not mutually exclusive with a state of physical תמימות. See Rashi to 33:18. In contrasting the two, I have opted to follow the simple peshat of the text, which does not indicate that Yaakov had healed from his confrontation.

⁸ Bereishit 33:11.

⁹ Bereishit 34:30.

¹⁰ The development of Yaakov's rationale for being critical of Shimon and Levi from a pragmatic concern to a more fundamental one concerning the use of such deceptive violence seems critical to me in illuminating another element of the text. When Yaakov voices his concerns in practical terms, in Chapter 34, the Torah, quite famously, cedes the last word in the discussion to Shimon and Levi, הכזונה יעשה את, אחותינו. And yet, when Yaakov gives voice to a deeper, more principled objection to his sons' behavior, at the very end of his life, the Torah very clearly gives him the last word on the incident.

continuing to reference their deception even on his deathbed, ¹¹ שמעון ולי אחים כלי חמס מכירותיהם
בסדם אל תבוא נפשי בקהלם אל תכד כבודי.

It seems to me that Yaakov's lifelong growth, in which he cultivates, over time, a unique sensitivity and capacity for expressing direct truthfulness, even in difficult situations, may also play a role in what might be otherwise perceived as one of the great errors of Yaakov's life: sending Yosef, alone, to the dangerous area of Shechem, to the brothers who Yaakov well knows are, to put it mildly, in friction with Yosef. Perhaps, though, Yaakov's decision to send Yosef was motivated by a desire for Yosef to be able to work out the growing tension that he was experiencing with his brothers in an honest and direct manner. Tragically, things do not work out as Yaakov might have hoped. But a man who spent his life developing the quality of truthfulness may not have had it any other way.

If we are to accept this approach to the affiliation between Yaakov and truthfulness, a related point comes into, I believe, a completely new light. In that same prophetic verse, the final pasuk of the Navi Michah, which serves as the basis for the association between Yaakov and truthfulness, his grandfather, Avraham, is associated with Chessed.

There is no doubt whatsoever that this description can be justified, whether it is our first Patriarch's adoption of his nephew and subsequent risk of his own life to rescue him from bondage; his astonishing capacity for welcoming guests in a state of postoperative infirmity; or, his intercession with the Almighty on behalf of the people of Sodom. And yet, when one contemplates, through the prism of various Midrashim, and especially, in Rambam's classical description of Avraham's early life in the first Chapter of Hilkhos Avodah Zarah, the iconoclastic quality of Avraham's youth comes to the fore. In his youth, apparently, Avraham brought his monotheistic message, his קריאה בשם ה', to a pagan society through the means of confrontation and iconoclasm, literally, and figuratively, שיבר את הצלמים. Far from leaving an impact on the society around him, Avraham escapes with his own life only through a miracle. Neither Nimrod, nor the denizens of Ur Kasdim for that matter, are elevated through this process.

Moving from the realm of the Midrash to the text, one notes a striking instance of selfishness on the part of Avraham. When Avraham expresses concern for his own life as he descends to Egypt together with Sarah, he asks her to expose herself to enormous risk for his sake. Whether or not it would have been appropriate for Avraham to expose Sarah to Pharaoh merely to save his own life is itself debatable, though the Ramban was unequivocal that even self-preservation could not possibly have justified exposing Sarah to this situation¹². What seems to me beyond debate is the acceptability of doing so for material benefit, which Avraham articulated as his first, and perhaps, primary motive, למען ייטב לי בעבורך וחיתה נפשי בגללך¹³.

¹¹ Bereishit 49:9.

¹² Ramban to Bereishit 12:10, s.v. VaYehi Ra'av Ba'Aretz.

¹³ Bereishit 12:13. See Rashi, ad loc., who explicitly notes that Avraham was interested in the gifts that he thought he would receive as Sarah's brother. In fairness, see Radak, ad loc., who is scandalized by Rashi's approach.

And yet, as he develops, Avraham dramatically alters his approach. He is still, of course, קורא בשם ה', but, as Chazal describe so vividly, he does so not through confrontation, but through compassionate engagement, the אכילה שתייה ולוויה of his ¹⁴אשל, to the point where he becomes the paragon of שם שמיים מתאהב על ידיך ¹⁵. The results are self evident; it is not for naught that the Hittite denizens of Kiryat Arba refer to Avraham as the נשיא אלוקים ¹⁶.

In this respect, then, a new parallelism between אמת ליעקב and לאברהם emerges: both are authentic descriptions of a life's work of molding of one's inner world, in which each of these respective אבות reversed a certain spiritually suboptimal proclivity of their youth into the defining quality of the unstinting עבודת ה' of their mature years. In the timeless words of Rabbenu Yonah, והמוסר קניין, השכל מתנה, ¹⁷.

¹⁴ Sotah 10b.

¹⁵ Rambam Sefer Ha-Mitzvot Aseh 3.

¹⁶ Bereishit 23:6.

¹⁷ See commentary of Rabbeinu Yonah to Avot 5:12.