

Emet L'Yaakov, Chesed 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, *titen emet l'Ya'akov*, just as his father is associated with courage, *gevurah*, and his grandfather with the virtue of kindness, ²*chesed*. *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, ³*ba achikha b'mirma, va'yikach birkhatekha*. Even though Yaakov was not the one to initiate this course of action, and, even if he was clearly uncomfortable with it, and, even if it was, in a sense, *kibbud eim*, 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 *emet*.

Moving beyond this incident alone, Yaakov's wresting of the bekhora 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 VaYetzeh, would hardly seem to be the actions of the archetype of truthfulness.

In fairness, one may certainly justify Chazal's 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 employer, *'atena yidaten ki v'chol kochi avadti et avichen*⁴. To be sure, this aspect of Yaakov's integrity and rectitude is on full display in the coda of Rambam's Hilkhos *Sechirut*⁵, in which Yaakov's honesty as an employee over two decades

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 בהכמה. Yet, it should not be lost on us that this is precisely the term which the Torah uses to describe the deception perpetrated by Yaakov'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 Hilkhos Sekhirut, *u'motzi kol ha'yom b'mirmah*, as a contrast with the honesty of Yaakov as an employee of Lavan.

⁴ Bereishit 31:6.

⁵ Rambam Mishneh Torah Hilkhos Sekhirut 13:7.

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 *emet*. Perhaps, 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.

II.

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, *va'yignov Ya'akov et lev Lavan Ha'Arami al beli bigid lo ki vore'ach hu.*⁶

Rambam's injunction against any form of deception, including *genevat da'at*, is equal parts and categorical as it is severe:

It is forbidden for man to conduct himself with words that are stealthy and seductive; and he shall not be one thing with his mouth and another with his heart; but his inner and outer being must be the same, and the matter in his heart must be what he expresses. And, it is forbidden to deceive all people, even a gentile...even one word of seduction and deception is forbidden. But man must be of true lip, steadfast spirit, and pure heart, free from all travail and clamor

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 an association with that which is deceptive, *va'ya'akveni zeh pa'amayim*, to *yashrut*, honesty and integrity. And, even as he is wounded, in the physical sense of the term, and may no longer match the

⁶ Bereishit 31:20.

descriptive term of his youth, tam, he is now, ironically, even with his limp, so to speak, elevated to ⁷ *sheleimut*.

If, indeed, the very signature of the Almighty is Truth itself, *chotamo shel ha-Kadosh Baruch Hu emet*⁸, there can be no minimizing the significance of this character trait in attaining the status of *sheleimut*. The sheer fact that an inquiry concerning integrity, *nasata v'natata be'emunah*⁹, precedes any of the other inquiries of the celestial Beit Din is in its own right sufficient evidence of the centrality of this virtue.

III.

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 not only the gift, the mincha, which he offers, but, in the literal sense, the bracha has gotten through deception, *kach na et birchati*.¹⁰

Critically, Yaakov does not run from Esav, but, on the contrary, confronts him directly, *v'hu avar lifneiheim*, 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 *mirmah*, 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, *v'ne'esfu elai v'bikuni, v'nishmadti ani u'veti*¹¹, the end of Sefer Bereishit tells a different story altogether¹². Yaakov never truly forgives Shimon and Levi for their violent plot, continuing to reference their deception even on his deathbed, *Shimon v'Levi achim, kelei chamas mecherotehem*¹³.

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

⁷ Admittedly, Chazal assert that *sheleimut* reflects the healing of his wound, and therefore, not mutually exclusive with a state of physical *temumut*. 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 Talmud Bavli Yoma 69a.

⁹ Talmud Bavli Shabbat 31a.

¹⁰ Bereishit 33:11.

¹¹ Bereishit 34:30.

¹² 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, *ha'chi Zonah ya'aseh et achoteinu*. 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.

¹³ Bereishit 49:9.

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.

IV.

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 Hilkhot Avodah Zarah, the iconoclastic quality of Avraham's youth comes to the fore. In his youth, apparently, Avraham brought his monotheistic message to a pagan society through the means of confrontation and iconoclasm, literally, and figuratively, *shiber et ha'tzlamim*. 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 situation¹⁴. 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, *l'ma'an yitav li va'avureh v'chaitah nafshi biglalech*¹⁵.

¹⁴ Ramban to Bereishit 12:10, s.v. VaYehi Ra'av Ba'Aretz.

¹⁵ 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, *koreh b'shem Hashem*, but, as Chazal describe so vividly, he does so not through confrontation, but through compassionate engagement, the achilah, shetiyah, and linah of his ¹⁶eshel, to the point where he becomes the paragon of she'yihieh shem shamayim mitahev al yadekha¹⁷. The results are self evident; it is not for naught that the pagan denizens of Kiryat Arba refer to Avraham as the nesi Elokim¹⁸.

In this respect, then, a new parallelism between *emet l'Ya'akov* and *chesed l'Avraham* emerges: both are authentic descriptions of a life's work of molding of one's inner world, in which each of these respective Avot reversed a certain challenge of their youth into the *defining* quality of the unstinting Avodat Hashem of their mature years.

In the timeless words of Rabbenu Yonah, *ha'sekhel matanah, v'ba'musar kinyan*, if intellect is a gift, moral and ethical development is the result of lifelong acquisition¹⁹. The blood, sweat, and tears which Avraham and Yaakov invested in acquiring their defining characteristics, chesed and emet respectively, does not diminish one iota from their surpassing greatness; on the contrary, in the finest tradition of *b'makom she'ba'alei teshuva omdim, afilu tzadikim gemurim einam yecholim la'amod*²⁰, it only serves to enhance it.

¹⁶ Sotah 10b.

¹⁷ Rambam Sefer Ha-Mitzvot Aseh 3.

¹⁸ Bereishit 23:6.

¹⁹ See commentary of Rabbeinu Yonah to Avot 5:12.

²⁰ Talmud Bavli Berakhot 34b.