

Smooth Talking Villains

Parashat Va-yeitzei 5774

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There's nothing like a smooth talking villain. Those are the ones in the movies that we love to hate. Even though they may commit terrible crimes and represent the darkest side of human nature, the fact that they do it with style and panache has a tendency to draw us in... Think of the always dapper, tuxedo wearing, manicured mustached, iconic crime boss Don Corleone, played by the inimical Marlon Brando. Or his more recent manifestation, Tony Soprano, always smoking a Cuban Montecristo, and driving a Cadillac Escalade. Or how about the violently depraved Hannibal Lecter who captivated audiences with his refined habits; he sat on the Board of Directors of the Baltimore Symphony, he was a multi-lingual member of the social elite, who enjoys a good glass of cianti! Or even, Darth Vader—who looks sleek and strapping in black, but who also seems to possess a sophistication and depth that even his evil cohorts find mysterious. Count Dracula, the castle dwelling nobleman, who like Vader, has a love of black capes...always looks debonair.

I think what intrigues us about characters like these is that their charm, their polish tend to obscure their evil ways. They beguile us with their smooth talking, their refined tastes, their appreciation for elegance and decorum and somehow we are shocked, again and again, when they reveal themselves to be the scoundrels they are! We had just such a character in our parasha this morning, and his name is Lavan, or Laban. We have seen him many times already in Genesis. As Rebekkah's father, it is he who negotiates with Abraham's servant over her marriage to Isaac. And the Torah gives us a glimpse into his character. He seems at the outset, extraordinarily hospitable. He welcomes the servant to come in, sit down, have something to eat to drink; bathe your feet, relax, take a load off, spend the night. And the Torah says that all this graciousness is because he sees that the servant has presented Rebekkah with nose rings and bracelets and all kinds of bling, and that he clearly comes from a wealthy master. Later, Laban's house becomes the refuge for his nephew Jacob, who has to flee from home and from his brother Esau's murderous wrath. But we know what happens... 'Oh, Jacob, you're my *mishpacha*, my family...of course you can come and live with me.' 'Atz' *mi u'vsari Atah*...you're my flesh and bones Jacob, of course I would love to have you live here.' And in the next breath he's already co-opted Jacob into seven years of indentured servitude, the price to be paid for marrying his

daughter Rachel. Only seven years later he switches Rachel for the older sister Leah under the *huppah*—and dupes Jacob into seven more years of labor in order to marry the daughter he really loves. And when Jacob confronts Laban with his deceit, Laban presents himself as being on the moral high ground...Listen Jacob, he says, we don't marry younger sisters before older sisters, here in these parts. Here we protect the dignity older siblings, unlike where you come from where you steal birth rights from your older brother. And then years later when Jacob and his family are preparing once and for all to leave Laban's compound, he feigns emotion, claiming that he'll miss his children and grandchildren so desperately if they leave. But the Torah tells us with a wink of an eye that what Laban really wants is the now exceedingly wealthy Jacob to stay put, and not take all of his flocks and material success somewhere else. That's what he cares about, not so much the cranky grandchildren. Laban always presents himself as having the best interests of others in mind, of being the voice of morality and reason and hospitality, when he really is profoundly selfish, and obsessed with acquiring money and possessions. Even his name encodes something of his character. Laban or Lavan means white, as in the color. White, of course, symbolizes purity, virtue, integrity...But spelled backwards, lavan becomes naval, which means a villain, a scoundrel. Laban may appear, like the villains I mentioned earlier, to be virtuous, but his deeds quickly reveal his vile intentions. I know it's been a while since Passover, but perhaps you recall that section of the Haggadah which reads: *Tzei u'Imad mah bikeish Lavan ha'Arami la'asot l'Ya'akov avinu*: Go and learn what Laban the Aramean tried to do to our ancestor Jacob. Pharaoh's decree was only against the males, while *Lavan bikeish la'akor et ha'kol*...Laban attempted to destroy everyone. What a stunning condemnation. Laban is worse than Pharaoh! How would Laban have destroyed all of the Jewish people? It seems that holding Jacob's family back in Haran, keeping them in his clutches of idol worship and materialism would have quickly ended this experiment that was begun with Abraham. At least Pharaoh only plotted against the men...not realizing how smart and resourceful Jewish women are, and who ultimately are given credit for the redemption of the Jewish people in Egypt. If it were up to Pharaoh the Jewish people would be a debilitated slave nation; if it were up to Lavan, there would be no Jewish people at all. Indeed a midrash suggests that Laban alerted Esau of Jacob's return, and urged him to avenge himself and kill him. This too would have meant the end of the Jewish people.

Unfortunately smooth talking, manipulative villains who fool people into believing that they are actually good guys are not just the fictional storylines of Hollywood movies or ancient tales of the Bible. They are all too real, and because they have the charm and finesse to fool many people, they tend to be among the most dangerous people around. Just before Rosh Hashanah this year, I heard about a very famous tweet. It seems that the recently elected President of Iran, Hassan Rouhani, tweeted a Happy New Year message to the Jewish people around the world. It was in every newspaper, and all over Facebook, and social media. A breakthrough, people called this, not stopping to think that the very same Iranian government forbids Iranian citizens from even having Twitter accounts. And since then, Rouhani, who headed up the Iranian Nuclear Commission under the Ahmadinajad administration, has embarked on a charm offensive. President Obama chatted with him on the phone, he has sat for interviews and submitted op-eds to the New York Times. He has extended the hand of diplomacy and civility to European nations. And he is being largely embraced for his congeniality. When NBC's Ann Coury asked President Rouhani whether he, like his predecessor, denies the Holocaust, his response was "I'm not a historian, I'm a politician." When CNN's Christian Amanpour asked whether he believed that 6 million Jews were killed by the Nazis, Rouhani said "I'm not a historian when it comes to speaking of the dimensions of the Holocaust." And since Rouhani became president, Iran has continued to enrich uranium, continued to build heavy water reactors—another path to obtaining nuclear weapons capabilities, continued to build underground bunkers all the while insisting that the program is for civilian purposes. This of course belies the fact that you don't need uranium enrichment for a civilian nuclear program. But now in Geneva, world leaders including those of our own country, are coming closer to signing a deal that would lift sanctions but allow Iran to retain the capabilities to pursue nuclear weapons. The initial deal would ease sanctions that cost Iran \$5 billion a month in exchange for Iran abandoning only "the most advanced aspects of its nuclear program." President Obama thinks this is preferable to any escalation of tension with Iran—but I'm not so sure. This storyline read against the backdrop of Laban's fraudulence makes me very concerned. Hasan Rouhani, no matter how genteel he seems on television has been an apparatchik in the Islamic regime for many years, including serving as Minister of Intelligence then as National Security Advisor to President Hashemi Rafsanjani in 1993, when Iran backed terrorists blew up the Israeli Embassy and two years later the Jewish Community Center in Buenos Aires. It is impossible

that the National Security Advisor didn't know about this, not to mention being intimately involved. Since his election, the violent crackdowns on political opposition, imprisonment, and executions have continued unabated. And of course, Iran remains the most important lifeline to the regime in Syria, whose crimes against humanity are catastrophic. Finally, not one iota of Iran's nuclear program has been dialed back under Rouhani's leadership.

You know, the Rev. Billy Graham, the 95 year old evangelist who is undoubtedly one of the most famous religious leaders of all time used to say that "a good evangelist should preach with a Bible in one hand and the daily newspaper in the other." To tell you the truth, I don't particularly agree with that. I happen to think the Bible, or the Torah has enough life-changing wisdom all on its own, that I don't need the newspaper to back up my message. But today, my friends, I am very worried about the appeasement that read about in my daily newspaper. And because I am a perpetual student of Torah and of history, I believe there is much to be learned from past experiences with that particular position. Hasan Rouhani, to quote Prime Minister Netanyahu, is "a wolf in sheep's clothing." He is still answerable to the real supreme leader of Iran, the fanatical Ayatollah Khamenei. Please do not be silent as a regime that poses existential danger to Israel and to the free world is allowed to sweet talk his way into retaining a threatening nuclear program whiel the one effective means of containing it—crippling sanctions, are lifted. Speak out, write to our leaders, write to our newspapers, make your voice heard. If we learn nothing from Parashat Va-yeitze, it is that unscrupulous, narcissistic leaders appear in every generation, and continue to fool and dupe people time and again. Many commentators note that Laban is often referred to in the Torah as Laban the Aramean, or *Lavan Ha'Arami*. Why is that moniker repeated so often? I get it already, he's an Aramean. The Midrash tells us that it is to remind us of the similarity of Arami and *Ramai*...*Ramai* means a cheater, a swindler, a fraud.

We allow ourselves to be cheated and duped at our peril, dear friends. Let us do what we can to prevent it.