

MORASHAH
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Parashat HaShavuah Series

Rabbi Shlomo Segal

Parashat Toldot

I could not help agonizing over the many complex themes present in this week's Torah portion. Rivalry, deception, theft, family dissolution... these are all things that one would think should not be in the grand story of God's chosen people. In fact, in an effort to mitigate this tension, commentators attempt to rationalize Jacob's behavior by making the claim that he was entitled to take Esau's blessing as a result of purchasing the birthright. If this is so, then why, when his mother tells him to trick his father, does he protest with the words "Ulai yimusheini avi"- "perhaps my father will feel me" (Gen. 27:12)? Would Jacob have had any qualms about engaging in this activity if he felt legitimately entitled to the blessing?

Rabbi Shmuel Klitsner, in his book Wrestling Jacob: Deception, Identity and Freudian Slips in Genesis, argues that Jacob had unconscious moral misgivings about following his mother's directive. He takes a Freudian approach, using the text to explain the family dynamics where Isaac loves Esau conditionally, yet nothing is said regarding his feelings towards Jacob. Jacob does experience unconditional love from his mother, yet that love "embraces the child as an indistinguishable part of herself" and therefore he becomes completely dependent on her. It enables him to take comfort in the impossible

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promise that she will be the one responsible for his actions when he deceives his father. We can also see Jacob's misgivings about his behavior from the choice of words in the text. *Haktav Vehakabbala* points out that Jacob uses the word *ulai* (maybe) instead of *pen* (lest) when he fears his father will feel him, indicating a desire that his mother would cancel the directive and let circumstances take their course without intervention. Yet he proceeds with the deception and the rest is history.

Nechama Leibowitz points out that the entire second half of the Genesis narrative (i.e., Jacob's ordeal with Laban and the sale of Joseph to the Egyptians) can be considered *middah keneged middah* "measure for measure" for Jacob's actions regarding the birthright. One must wonder how many times Jacob must have pondered Isaac's words, "*Mi atta b'ni*" "Who are you, my son?" (Gen. 27:18). Yet, Jacob had such a disintegration of self that the rest of his life story was understood as offensive rather than a consequence of his actions. He was simply unable to see the destructiveness of his actions and the correlation to subsequent events. The negative was external - outside of himself.

Rav A. I. Kook took a unique approach to the nature of Jacob and Esau. Esau's name is from the root '*asa*' - to do or make or complete. He was full of strength and energy. Jacob's name, on the other hand, means a heel. While Esau represents earthy, aggressive power, Jacob represents the harnessing of that power, indicating that these negative traits should be harnessed, not eradicated

completely. By doing this, one truly becomes a *sar*, or ruler (indicated by the name *Yisrael*).

I would take this idea a bit further. Perhaps we all have aspects of both Jacob and Esau embedded in us. We may not want to acknowledge it. It is painful. It is especially disturbing to think that we have parts of us that are particularly aggressive or deceitful. Yet look what happens when we fail to introspect and recognize these parts of us. Carl Jung talks about various 'shadow' aspects of the psyche – the dark parts that we don't want to acknowledge. Yet how many times do these negative traits get expressed in inadvertent and often destructive ways?

How many stories do we hear of people who commit atrocities in the name of serving God? How many times do we hear of "religious people" committing heinous atrocities to others – whether it is a recalcitrant husband withholding a *get* and using Jewish law in a way to commit one of the most egregious *chilulei Hashem* – in using our Torah to promote pain and suffering to others? What about the silence coming from the religious establishment regarding sexual abuse and domestic violence? How many times do we hear of people being shunned for not being "religious enough" or not wearing the right head coverings or clothing, all in the name of being an "*ehrlliche yid*"? What about people throwing rocks at drivers on Shabbos? Are these truly actions that bring honor and glory to the Almighty?

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One of the hallmarks of the book of *Bereishit* (Genesis) according to the RaMBa"N is "*maasei avot siman lebanim*" – what occurred to the forefathers is a sign for the children. May we truly learn from the stories in this book. Our forefathers did many great things and we ought to emulate them. However, we would be remiss not to examine the entire picture and learn from their mistakes as well. By examining our good and bad facets and learning from them, we will become authentic *sarim* (rulers). Amen.

Shabbat Shalom.