



The Problem With Jacob: Viewing our Forefather Honestly

Parashat Va-yeitzei, Genesis 28:10-32:3 | By Mark Greenspan

“Personal Integrity” by Kassel Abelson (pp. 360) in *The Observant Life*

Introduction

It’s hard not to feel uneasy when reading about our forefather, Jacob. Even before he is born, Jacob battles Esau for the birthright. Twice in his youth Jacob callously manipulates circumstances in order to gain both the birthright and the patriarchal blessing. The Torah never criticizes our forefather’s actions, but it suggests that the consequence of his actions leads to misery. His duplicitousness leads to treachery, first by his father-in-law to be, and later by his sons. Having deceived others, others now deceive him. Still, the Torah never questions Jacob’s method of attaining the birthright and the blessing. In the real world of the Torah (and our society) shrewdness is often admired even when it takes place at another person’s expense. Worst of all, the sages depict Esau as a wicked person while Jacob is the righteous son. Wasn’t Esau the victim of dishonesty?

We struggle with questions of honesty and personal integrity in our daily lives. We promise (in court) to tell “the whole truth and nothing but the truth,” but there are circumstances in which honesty may not necessary be the best policy. In the business world, dishonesty is all too common (Let the buyer beware). When is a lie or a falsehood justified? Should our adherence to the truth be unequivocal and absolute? If the world rests on “truth, justice and peace,” (Pirkei Avot 1:18) how can we justify telling even a little white lie? How do we reconcile the ideal world of *halakhab*, “You shall not deal deceitfully with one another,” (Leviticus 19:11) with the real world of the Biblical narrative in which falsehood is common place and often rewarded?

Then Jacob said to Lavan, “Give me my wife, for my time is fulfilled, that I may cohabit with her.” And Lavan gathered all the people of the place and made a feast. When evening came he took his daughter Leah and brought her to him, and he cohabited with her. Lavan had given his maidservant, Zilpah, to his daughter Leah as his as her maid. When morning came, there was Leah! So he said to Lavan, “What is this you have done to me? I was in your service for Rachel! Why did you deceive me?” Lavan said, “It is not the practice in our place to marry off the younger before the older...”

- Genesis 29:21-26

Sources and Resources

- a) *Why did you deceive me? The stem r-m-b is the same used by Isaac in 27:35 to define Jacob’s own act of deception. Apart from this consonance, there may also be an implied pay on the often-repeated designation “Lavan the Aramean.” Compare Hebrew arammi and rammai.*
- Nahum Sarna, The JPS Torah Commentary
- b) *Jacob as a young man is not portrayed in a favorable light. First he acquires the birthright through his heartless exploitation of his own brother’s misery; then he purloins the patriarchal blessing by means of crafty deception practiced upon his blind and aged father. In both instances, the outcome is legally valid and irrevocable, notwithstanding the unsavory aspects of Jacob’s actions. It is evident that the successful application of shrewd opportunism was well respected in the ancient Near East as it is in contemporary society. The two incidents also appear to betray a thoroughly formalistic conception of law in which strict outward adherence to certain practices or principles are decisive irrespective of the true spirit of the law and disregard of moral considerations. It is remarkable, therefore, that the biblical narrative*

has succeeded in weaving the stories into the larger biography of Jacob in such a way as to add up to an unqualified condemnation of Jacobs actions.

- Nahum Sarna, The JPS Torah Commentary

- c) *Rabbi Jonathan said: God's intention was that the birthright should have stemmed from Rachel, for it is said, "These are the generations of Jacob, Joseph" (Genesis 37:2). But through her prayers for mercy to spare her from marrying Esau, Leah was placed ahead of Rachel in the birthright. Nevertheless, because Rachel effaced herself, the Holy One restored the birthright to Rachel. How did Rachel efface herself? In the following verse, as will be explained: "And Jacob told Rachel that he was her father's brother" (Genesis 29:12). Was Jacob her father's brother? Was he not in fact a son of her father's sister? However, Jacob described himself as "her father's brother" after he asked Rachel, "Will you marry me?" and she replied, "Yes, but my father is a trickster, and you cannot beat him in trickery." Jacob asked, "How would he trick me?" She replied, "I have an older sister, and he will not have me marry ahead of her." It was then that Jacob said, "In trickery, I am your father's brother." She asked, "But is it proper for a righteous man to resort to trickery?" He replied, "Yes, for we read: 'With the pure thou dost show thyself pure, but with the crooked thou dost show thyself wily' " (2 Samuel 22:27). Jacob gave Rachel certain tokens by which to identify herself. But when the wedding night came, Rachel said to herself: Now my sister will be humiliated. So she turned the tokens over to Leah. Hence it is said, "And it came to pass in the morning that, behold, it was Leah" (Genesis 29:25). Are these words to be construed as saying that until morning she was not Leah? No, what is meant is that, because of the tokens Rachel had turned over to her, Jacob did not know until morning that it was Leah.*

- BT Megillah 13b; Baba Batra 123a

- d) *Rabbi Meir used to say: A man should not urge his friend to dine with him when he knows that his friend will not do so. And he should not offer him many gifts when he knows that his friend will not accept them. And he should not open, for a guest, casks of wine which are to be sold by the shopkeeper, unless he informs the guest of it. And he should not invite him to anoint himself with oil if the jar is empty. If, however, the purpose is to show the guest great respect, it is permitted. But surely this cannot be right. For Ulla once came to Rav Judah's house and the latter opened up for him casks that were later to be sold by the shopkeeper! He must have informed him of this fact. Or if you wish, I can say that the case of Ulla is different, for he was so dear to Rav Judah that he would have opened for him even those that were not to be sold by the shopkeeper. Our Rabbis taught: A man should not go to the house of a mourner with a bottle in which the wine shakes about; neither should he fill it with water because he thereby deceives him. If, however, there is a large assembly present, it is permitted.*

- BT Chullin 94a

- e) *How does one dance before the bride? Beit Shammai says: The bride as she is. Beth Hillel say: 'Beautiful and graceful bride!' Beit Shammai said to Beit Hillel: If she was lame or blind, does one say of her: 'Beautiful and graceful bride'? Whereas the Torah said, 'Keep far from a false matter.' (Exodus 23:7) Said Beit Hillel to Beit Shammai: According to your words, if one has made a bad purchase in the market, should one praise it in his eyes or depreciate it? Surely, one should praise it in his eyes. Therefore, the Sages said: Always should the disposition of man be pleasant with people. When Rabbi Dimi came, he said: Thus they sing before the bride in the West: "No powder and no paint and no waving of the hair, and still a graceful gazelle."*

- BT Ketubot, 16b

Reflections

The use of the Hebrew root *r-m-b* both in the story of Isaac's blessing and in the negotiations for a wife for Jacob suggests that the two acts of deception and falsehood are connected. In both cases, the lie is not quite a lie, it simply an avoidance the whole truth. When Isaac asks Jacob, "Are you my son, Esau," he answers *ami*, "It is I." Jacob never actually says that he is Esau; he simply fails to identify himself as Jacob. Similarly, when

Laban negotiates his daughter's marriage to Jacob, he conveniently fails to mention that it is not their custom to marry off the younger daughter before the older one. Few people are out and out liars; they simply fail to tell the whole truth. Often dishonesty is not what we say but what we fail to say.

The *midrash* draws our attention to another aspect of the deception. Jacob feels the end justifies the means in his acquisition of his father's birthright and blessing; after all, his mother has been learned through an oracle that he is the one to carry on the birthright. It is significant that the deception in Laban's house is also connected to a question of first and second born, this time Leah and Rachel. Ironically, Jacob is deceived because of Rachel's honesty. She cannot bear to humiliate her older sister so she turns the identifying tokens over to her. Jacob attempts to outsmart his future father-in-law but he gets 'hung by his own petard.'

All of this leaves us feeling sullied by the acts of deception and manipulation. But these acts are not so different from the dishonesty that is practiced in the everyday world in which we live. It is interesting, then, that the Torah places so much emphasis on the importance of speaking the truth in court, in business, and in our daily interactions. Truth is important but there are times when other values take precedence over honesty; in not causing hurt or humiliation to another person, for instance. We must avoid lying in order to serve our own interests, but *kavod*, or the dignity of another, might be reason for allowing small, inconsequential, falsehoods. *Beit Shammai* and *Beit Hillel* argued about whether it was appropriate to tell a bride that she was beautiful when she wasn't.

We should not be too quick to dismiss *Beit Shammai's* point of view. Praising the homely bride and telling her that she is beautiful is not only false but it can be humiliating to the bride who knows full well that she is not so beautiful. One must choose one's words carefully lest our exaggeration only serves to make the bride feel even worse. *Beit Hillel*, on the other hand, is more concerned with the relationship than the unvarnished truth. For him, every bride is beautiful on her wedding day and therefore, it is not untrue to tell her she is graceful and lovely on that day.

Halakhah L'ma-aseh

- a. *The importance of truth-telling is so basic to the biblical world view that it is included in the Ten Commandments: "You shall not bear false witness against your neighbor" (Exodus 20:16). With these words, the Torah formally forbids testifying falsely in the court under any circumstances.*
- *The Observant Life*, pp. 360
- b. *"Shop keepers must wipe their measures clean twice a week, their weights once a week, and their scale after every use." (Mishnah Baba Batra 5:10) ...In business, the halakhah requires that an individual observe the highest standards of honesty and good faith. A person must not set self-interest above truth.*
- *The Observant Life*, pp. 360
- c. *Honesty is not solely a matter of business dealings. "As there is wronging in buying and selling," the mishnah declares, "there is wronging in words. One must not ask 'How much is this thing?' if one has no intention of buying it." (Mishnah Baba Metzi'ah 4:10) ...The Talmud tells us....that "it is forbidden to steal the mind of other people, even other people (BT Hullin 94a)...by misleading another person, by goading that person into believing to be true what one knows oneself not to be true.*
- *The Observant Life*, pp. 360
- d. *Lashon ha-rab, literally, 'evil tongue' or 'evil language' denotes the act of passing on harmful information about another person... a statement may be true or false.*
- *The Observant Life*, pp. 360

- e. *Scripture is saying (in the story of the midwives) that saving lives comes before telling the truth... Indeed, Judaism puts a supreme value on human life and the halakhab rules that piku-ah nefesh, the obligation to save one's own life or the life of another takes precedence over all the commandments except three: murder, immoral sexual acts and idolatry.*
- BT *Sanhedrin* 74a
- f. *May a doctor lie to a patient who has been diagnosed with a fatal illness if the doctor believes that the lie would be in the best interests of the patient? It is evident that Judaism deems it important to keep hope alive even in the most dire situations. A physician, therefore, need not feel obligated to tell the patient the whole truth. On the other hand, the physician must take into consideration the implications of withholding the full truth about the patient's conditions...the physician who elects to withhold the truth from the patient is, nevertheless responsible for consulting with the next of kin and informing them of the situation.*
- *The Observant Life*, pp. 360
- g. *The position of Beit Hillel seems to be that a well-meant lie is better than the stark painful truth - at least some of the time. The teaching of the Beit Hillel is accepted as the halakhab.*
- *The Observant Life*, pp. 360
- h. *"My God, keep my tongue from evil and my lips from speaking lies."*
- BT *B'rachot* 17a and the end of the *Amidah* in the liturgy

Questions to Ponder

1. Why is there such a big disconnect between the way Jacob and Esau are portrayed in the Torah and the way the sages imagined them? How can we reconcile these differences?
2. Lavan manages to trick Jacob into marrying his older daughter. Remember that he is the brother of Jacob's mother, Rebecca. How does this fact add to the irony of this story?
3. The *midrash* depicts Jacob as a victim of Rachel's actions? Why do you think the sages added this element to the biblical narrative?
4. If 'honesty' is so basic to the biblical worldview, why do we find so many examples of dishonesty in the biblical narrative?
5. In what ways is the claim for honesty in a judicial setting different from the claim for honest in other social and institutional contexts?
6. Advertising is a big part of business in the contemporary world. How does a businessperson balance honesty with the need to advertise and promote his or her product?
7. Do you agree with Abelson's suggestion that it is OK for a doctor to withhold the truth from a patient with a fatal illness? Why or why not?
8. Most people would agree that a small white lie that protects a person from hurt or humiliation is proper. Under what other circumstances do you feel that honesty is not necessarily the best policy?

Adapted from Torah Table Talk by Mark Greenspan