

JEWISH STUDY NETWORK

Parshat Toldot

In this week's Parsha we grapple with the infamous heist that altered the course of world history. Yaakov tricks his own father Yitzchok and steals the *Brachot* (birthright blessings) from Eisav. The consequences of this act are still felt today. It is the reason we are Jewish.

This is admittedly a bit troubling for us as Jews. Our claim to fame is stolen property? Maybe the ethical thing to do would be to just return the birthright to its rightful owners and apologize for the delay. (I'm sure they would politely decline the offer.) Of course, the faithful among us would claim that if that's the way it turned out then that's the way G-d wants it to be. Certainly, if G-d wanted Eisav to receive the *Brachot*, then Yaakov would not have gotten away with it. Actually, Yaakov had previously bought the birthright from Eisav, and the Midrash says that Rebecca was divinely inspired to direct Yaakov to take the *Brachot* that were, in fact, rightfully his. However, if indeed it were G-d's intention for Yaakov to get the *Brachot*, then why would G-d arrange matters in a way that required Yaakov to steal them?

Another question: Yaakov is supposed to be the embodiment of truth and honesty. In the Zohar, Yaakov represents the ideal of *Emet* (truth), which is the synthesis of Abraham's *chesed* (kindness) and Isaac's *din* (judgment). As the verse itself says, "Give truth to Yaakov" (Michah 7:20). How can a man who tricks his father and steals from his brother be the ultimate Man of Truth? We couldn't find a Jew with better qualifications?

Rabbi Yaakov Kamenetsky's brilliant insight puts the entire story in a new light. G-d was challenging Yaakov here in the most powerful way. Just as Abraham's most difficult test was the *akeida*, for there G-d challenged Abraham's *chesed* personality with a command to perform the cruelest of actions, similarly, Yaakov's most difficult test was his mother's directive to steal the *Brachot*. In fact, the Midrash tells us that Yaakov was crying as he carried out his mother's instructions. The principle for which Yaakov stood was indeed *emet*, and for that very reason G-d set up a situation that required him to deceive his father and brother. This is the most challenging kind of test, for it obligates man to overcome a personal sense of right and wrong and submit himself to the wisdom of the Creator.



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By doing so, man recognizes that G-d, not man, has the final word on morality and ethics. So much for Relativism. Yaakov triumphed at his “*akieda*”. He discovered the higher truth beyond himself. He truly is the Man of Truth.

Please don't misunderstand the point. Of course we must have principles that we live by and stand up for, but at the same time, we need to avoid the trap of becoming too concrete. There are many complicated situations in life where our principles fail us as a moral guide. Sometimes we simply can't trust our own judgment. This is why G-d gave us a Torah. The examples are endless, but here's one (unfortunately common) scenario: Occasionally, the truth can hurt a relationship. Should an honest person lie to keep the peace? The Torah says yes (Baba Metzia 87a). The implications of this go beyond the obvious. The Torah is saying that *shalom* takes precedence over *emet*. We are being instructed here to let go of our need to be right for the sake of *shalom*. This is no small challenge.

The awesome ability of our forefathers to reach beyond themselves resides within the heart of every Jew. It takes great humility to admit that we need to turn to the Torah for direction in our lives, but then humility is a distinctly Jewish characteristic. In some of the formative events of our history G-d was looking for this very quality. He still looks for it today.

Shabbat Shalom!

