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בס"ד

The Torah's Judgment on Jacob's Early Actions – Part II (Continued)

4. Facing Esau

Upon returning home, Jacob must face Esau and confront the moral issues associated with the acts he had perpetrated against his brother many years before. His twenty-year ordeal of being repeatedly deceived and exploited by Laban surely helped him appreciate the victim's perspective in such matters. However, judging from the message he sent to Esau – a respectful, perhaps deferential, but not an apologetic statement – he began his trip home without much trepidation as to how his brother would react to his return.

When his messengers inform him of Esau's approach with four hundred men (and do not bring with them a greeting reciprocating his message), he becomes alarmed and fearful for his life and the lives of his family. Despite having received G-d's assurance shortly after his departure from home that He will return him home safely (Gen. 28:13-15), as well as having received His instructions shortly before departing from Laban to return home and He will be with him (31:3), Jacob thought it possible that Esau might decimate him and his whole family. He realized the logical, contingent nature of divine promises; as the sages term it, *אָמַר גְּרַם הַחַטָּא*, "perhaps a sin has caused [their cancellation]," that is, he may have been unworthy of their fulfillment. He was aware of this principle at the time of receiving that first guarantee, manifested in the vow he made at the time (28:20-22). Of course, worthiness includes the critical detail of rectifying whatever one may have done to wrong his fellow man.

Until confronted with the actual and unavoidable threat of Esau, it seems that he had been in a state of denial concerning this matter. But now he was forced to address it. At first, he did not have more than a vague feeling as to what was necessary to be done in this regard.

In Genesis 32–33, the Torah describes a progressively more aware and contrite Jacob struggling with doubts that apparently had been lurking in his subconscious. He finally acknowledges his responsibility to make amends to his wronged brother, to obtain his forgiveness, and does, indeed, do so at their meeting. We will here provide a brief summary of these matters and present a fuller discussion of them in our studies on *Parashat Vayishlah Part I* and *Part II*.

Jacob prayed for G-d's intervention to save him from Esau. But the words he uttered reveal that even as he was praying he sensed the inadequacy of the prayer. Something was wrong. Of course, he himself was the cause of the problem that was confronting him and it was up to him to make the appropriate corrections. He tried to sleep, but he could not do so; his conscience was troubling him. He sent a prodigious gift of appeasement to Esau, with expressions of his subservience that included the symbolism of amicable numbers and then went to sleep again. Still, he was not able to sleep long and arose in the middle of the night. At a moment when he was alone, a mysterious "man" wrestled with him. This appears to have been the cosmic mystical representative of Esau, *אֱלֹהֵי עֵשָׂו*, as some sages call him (*Gen. Rab. 77:3; Tan. Vayishlah 8*). In the world of metaphor, he is the guardian angel of Esau, who watches over and asserts Esau's legitimate rights, and battles for their satisfaction. The struggle portrays Jacob, in the inner recesses of his being, engaging in introspection. We may assume that he thoroughly reviewed his past moral lapses, his punishments and their lessons, as well as Esau's just rights.

The angel cannot vanquish Jacob but strikes a blow to his thigh, wrenching his hip such that it causes him to limp. This perhaps symbolizes the subduing of the material dimension, those aspects of blessing that were not Jacob's due, a necessary condition for the transformation. The angel announces that Jacob's

name will be changed to Israel, as indeed is soon the case when not long afterwards G-d appears to Jacob at Bethel (35:10), blesses him and changes his name. The specific meanings of the names Jacob and Israel reflect the transformation that had taken place in Jacob.

This episode signifies that Jacob's soul-searching was sincere and effective. Now that he recognized his past guilt and Esau's legitimate rights, the brothers are able to arrive at an amicable resolution of their differences. Jacob's new perspective gets across to Esau. Both brothers now recognize that Jacob deserves the non-material aspects of the firstborn rights with its relevant blessing. Jacob concedes that his tactics in securing the blessing from his father were wrong.

When the brothers meet, Jacob treats Esau as his superior. He bows to him seven times and has his family bow; he repeatedly addresses him as "my master" and refers to himself as "your servant." With this he symbolically cedes to his elder brother a critical part of the blessing Isaac had originally intended for his elder son: "Be master over your brothers and your mother's sons shall bow to you" (27:29).

At first Esau refused Jacob's gift. By and by, as Jacob pressed, he termed his gift "my blessing" ("please take בְּרַכְתִּי" [33:11]). Employing the term *berakha* for the gift (not a standard usage) in place of the previously used term *minḥa* (v. 10), which connotes "tribute," is as if to say, "Please accept the blessing which I had received."

In reconciling with his brother Jacob made enormous strides. However, his past wrongdoing was multidimensional and is not yet fully resolved. Divine censure with the educational process it entails is not concluded for one who is to be a patriarch of the nation of G-d. That aspect of his deception that related to his father still had to be addressed.

5. The Joseph Episode

Shortly after settling in Canaan, Jacob is beset with an extended period of grief. He had greater love for Joseph, the firstborn of his true love Rachel, than for his other sons and he expressed it. Joseph seemed to have "bonded" with his father. This caused hatred and jealousy from the other sons toward the favorite. Of

course it was Laban's deceit of Jacob, the "measure for measure" recompense to Jacob for his deceit of his father, that led to Jacob being married to Leah first and to the enormous trouble brought about by that situation.

Joseph's brothers sell him into slavery and cover up their treachery with a deception of their father. Once again, the thematic similarities to Jacob's early wrongdoing are startling. This time the focus is on Jacob's deception of his father. As previously, key words provide literary linkage.

The brothers slaughter a goat, dip Joseph's ornamented tunic in its blood, send it to their father, and ask him if he can identify it. The key words are הִקֵּר נָא, "recognize please" (37:32). When Jacob identifies the tunic, the word the narrative uses which completes the scene of deception and begins his long period of mourning and anguish is וַיִּכְיֶרֶה, "and he recognized it" (v. 33), albeit drawing the wrong conclusion. This is the same root that reflected the link between Rachel's stealing the *terafim* from her father (Jacob's challenging Laban with the words הִקֵּר לִךְ) and Jacob's stealing the blessing from his father (וְלֹא הִכִּירוֹ), "and he did not recognize him"), as previously pointed out.

Jacob deceived his father with his brother's garments together with a goatskin; his sons deceived him with their brother's garment and goat's blood. As Rabbi Yehudah put it (Zohar, *Parashat Toldot*, under the heading תִּרְדָּה): "As a result of that *harada* (trembling) that Jacob brought upon Isaac his father, he was punished with the episode of Joseph, in which he experienced a similar *harada* at the moment when they told him 'this we found' (Gen. 37:32)...and although the Holy One Blessed Be He confirmed the blessings for him...he was punished with all that punishment [associated with the case of Joseph]."

As Jacob's misdeeds caused a lengthy separation from his father, his sons' wrongdoing caused a lengthy separation of his beloved son from him, a separation that appears to be of roughly equivalent duration.*

6. Other Indications

Negative aftereffects of Jacob's deceit and manifestations of divine censure appear reflected in other troubles that beset him and his children.

When Dinah was violated and in essence kidnapped – held hostage in Shechem’s home to his marriage proposal – Jacob was presented with a most difficult situation, one that lacked ordinary options. Shechem, a leader in the town, obviously did not intend to return Dinah. There was no legal recourse and Jacob’s family was not a military match for the town. This was a conundrum whose resolution required, by moral right, utilization of some measure of deceit. At that critical juncture, however, Jacob is paralyzed to act, unable to offer necessary leadership. Having been punished for deceit and being careful not to repeat his mistake, he could not now employ deceit even when morally indicated.

As a result, “The sons of Jacob answered Shechem and Hamor his father בְּמַרְמָה (34:13). A ruse was called for, but killing all the town’s males was an unnecessary and inappropriate conclusion to their ploy. They should have rescued Dinah while the townsmen were incapacitated and departed. Surely killing Shechem, the chieftain and chief villain, would have been adequate to release Dinah. (Based on the standards of the time, the townspeople would have accepted such an outcome; it would have been like popular tales of vulnerable outsiders who were being exploited who outsmarted the exploiters.) On his deathbed Jacob denounced Simeon and Levi’s wrath that led to the killing. (See our study on Gen. 34.)

The humiliation of Judah in his interaction with Tamar (and the unspoken embarrassment that episode surely caused Jacob), is another case in point. Tamar deceived her father-in-law but only as a result of his continual deceitful and insensitive behavior toward her (Gen. 38). Among the most conspicuous elements in the passage are a garment, a goat and the הֶקֶר stem. Tamar altered her mode of dress and concealed her face to dupe Judah into thinking she was somebody else; the price he contracted with her was a goat – the third time the garment-goat combination appears in these narratives of deception of Jacob and his family. When she sent Judah his security, the accompanying message prominently highlighted the phrase הֶקֶר נָא (“please recognize” v. 25) and in the following verse we are told וַיִּכַּר יְהוּדָה, that he did recognize. It is the fourth deception episode in which this stem is employed, the previous three involving Jacob directly. In *Genesis Rabbah* (85:9 and 11) it states:

Yehudah the son of Nahman stated in the name of Resh Laqish: “The Holy One Blessed Be He said to Judah [leader of the brothers], ‘You deceived your father with a goat. By your life, Tamar will deceive you with a goat.’” Rabbi Yohanan stated: “The Holy One Blessed Be He said to Judah, ‘You said to your father ‘הֶקֶר נָא.’ By your life, Tamar will say to you ‘הֶקֶר נָא.’”

In the context of criticizing the various political entities of the nation for practicing deception and treachery, Hosea cites G-d as declaring that the house of Israel has surrounded Him בְּמַרְמָה, “with guile” (Hos. 12:1), recalling Isaac’s use of that word to describe Jacob’s deceptive action (Gen. 27:35). In regard to retribution, Hosea continues: “Hashem...will punish Jacob according to his ways, according to his deeds will He recompense him. In the womb he took his brother by the heel, whereas in his strength he strove with a divine being, he strove with an angel and prevailed” (Hos. 12:3-5). The prophet’s linking his contemporary situation with the Torah’s description of Jacob grasping Esau’s heel indicates that he considered Jacob’s efforts to supplant his brother iniquitous, serving as a negative precedent for the national misbehavior.

In the following verses, after calling on the nation to practice kindness and justice and trust in G-d at all times (v. 7), the prophet makes a statement that, although ambiguous, may continue to be relevant to the theme of Jacob’s misdeeds. He criticizes those who rationalize their actions, refusing to see iniquity in what they do, כֹּל יַגִּיעֵי לֹא יִמָּצְאוּ לִי עוֹן אֲשֶׁר חָטָא (“in all my labors there is not to be found a misdeed that is truly sinful” [Hos. 12:9])!

When Jeremiah censured the people for their false and unfaithful ways, he cited Hashem saying, “Every man should guard himself from his friend and upon all brothers do not trust, for every brother is dealing deceitfully” (כִּי כָל אֶחָד עֵקוּב יַעֲקֹב [Jer. 9:3]). The reference to deceitful or exploitative behavior among brothers with this most unusual verbal coinage of עֵקוּב יַעֲקֹב is a clear allusion to Jacob’s name and to Esau’s complaint that “he was rightly called Jacob, for he has tricked me twice” (וַיַּעֲקֹבֵנִי זֶה פַעַמַיִם [Gen. 27:36]). It is a definitive statement that Jacob’s early treatment of his brother had been unconscionable. Furthermore, two verses later in Jeremiah we read Hashem’s complaint concerning the deceitful people: “You

dwell in the midst of מְרִמָּה (deceit), בְּמִרְמָה (in deceit) they refuse to know Me.” This is a dual allusion to Isaac’s use of that word in describing Jacob’s deceptive behavior.**

In the course of recompensing an individual for his deception and in accordance with his contrition and consequent changed behavior, G-d may transform the long-term effects of the deception or its punishment to a constructive purpose. Thus, Jacob marrying Leah, Joseph being sold to Egypt and Judah engaging in sexual relations with his daughter-in-law, despite the tremendous problems they caused at the time, ultimately had beneficial effects. The message is evident: A human being, in trying to secure what he perceives to be an appropriate goal according to his limited understanding, should not violate G-d’s will in his doing so. If he does violate G-d’s will he will receive his just deserts and it may require wrenching experiences to return to a worthy state. The ends do not justify the means. When recipients are deserving, one way or another G-d will fashion a way to accomplish His ends.

Endnotes

* The Torah does not state the exact duration of Jacob’s absence from Isaac. He was twenty years with Laban, but we are not told his total time away from home. Some commentators have assumed, in a midrashic vein (see Rashi on Gen. 28:9), that counting traveling and various stops it was twenty-two years, the same number of years Joseph was separated from Jacob, rendering this a more precise case of measure for measure.

** It is noteworthy that in the Five Books the word *mirmah* only appears twice: in Isaac’s statement about Jacob and in describing the response of Jacob’s sons to Shechem. In the form that both these Torah usages are formulated, with the *bet* prefix, that is, בְּמִרְמָה, there are only two additional attestations in Tanakh, the two cited in these paragraphs, one in Hosea 12:1 and the other in Jeremiah 9:5.

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