BS”D

*Parshas VaYetzei*

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Was Yaakov a Thief?

By Chaim Zev Citron

When you read the stories of Yaakov Avinu in the Torah, it is very hard not to feel uneasy about some of the moral decisions that Yaakov made. To be sure, the Chazal and the classic commentaries defend Yaakov’s choices in a masterful and convincing way. Nevertheless, the very fact that these choices need defending may leave us uncomfortable.

If we could find a major story which reflects Yaakov’s character as impeccably honest and clearly moral, I feel it would vindicate the other stories that appear to have a moral ambiguity about them. In real life, the choices we have to make are very often not black and white. There are often complex issues, competing moral choices that we must face. So were many of the choices and actions that Yaakov made and took. If he is revealed as a man of true integrity, we will feel much more comfortable about the complex choices that he made.

From the beginning Yaakov struggled with his brother for supremacy as the Torah says about Rivkah’s pregnancy with the twins, “The children fought within her.”

One day Esav comes home from the hunt. He is famished. Yaakov has cooked a lentil stew. Esav asks for some stew. Instead of offering it freely to Esav, Yaakov asks his brother to sell him his birthright. Esav agrees. The deal is done, and Esav has his meal and leaves.

Yaakov’s conduct seems unfair. Esav is vulnerable, desperately needing food. Yaakov manipulates Esav into selling his birthright.

Now, if we read the story carefully, we see things are not so simple.

First of all, Rivkah had been told when she was pregnant, that the older son would serve the younger. So, Yaakov was in fact meant to take over the birthright.

Furthermore, the Torah states that after Esav left, he despised the birthright. Esav didn’t complain about being cheated. On the contrary, he felt he had sold something meaningless and trivial worth nothing.

But again, even after these explanations, we still wonder about Yaakov’s actions.

Many years pass. Yitzchok, who is old and blind, wants to bestow his blessing upon Esav. He asks Esav to hunt for game and prepare a meal at which time he will receive his father’s blessing.

Yitzchok’s wife Rivkah overhears the conversation. She feels Yaakov is more worthy of the blessing. She insists that he pretend to be Esav and receive the blessing. After preparing a meal, she gives Esav’s clothing to Yaakov to wear. She covers his arms with hairy goat skins so he can pass as Esav.

Now Yaakov is not a very eager participant in this scheme. But the fact remains that he follows his mother’s directions, succeeds in passing himself off as Esav to his father, and receives the blessings.

Just as Yaakov slips out of the room, Esav arrives with the feast he had prepared for his father. Both Esav and Yitzchok immediately realize what has happened. Esav cries out, “He tricked me twice. He took my birthright, and now he has taken my blessing.”

But it is too late. Yitzchok explains that the blessing to Yaakov stands. A minimal blessing is all that is left for Esav.

Again we ask ourselves, why did Yaakov do what he did. To obey his mother? Well, what about his father?

The fact remains that after this incident when Yaakov is told by his father to go to Padan Aram to take a wife from the daughters of his uncle Lavan that Yitzchok blesses Yaakov unequivocally: “G-d will bless you, make you fruitful, and multiply. May He give the blessing of Avraham to you and to your children after you to inherit the land in which you dwell…”

Obviously, if Yaakov receives this wonderful blessing from his father, Yitzchok doesn’t consider him a scoundrel. Just the opposite. It is Yaakov, not Esav, who will receive the blessing of Avraham.

It’s also clear that Rivkah felt very strongly that Yaakov, not Esav, should get the blessing. After all, she knew the prophecy, “The older will serve the younger.” And Yitzchak himself tells Esav that Yaakov’s blessing stands.

Still, when all is said and done, Yaakov’s conduct still makes us uneasy.

In fact, the Zohar states that although Yaakov did indeed deserve the blessing, he paid a terrible price for the pain he caused his father: “And Yitzchak trembled a mighty trembling” when he learned he had blessed Yaakov rather than Esav.

Because of this, says the Zohar, Yaakov suffered over the loss of his son Yosef, thinking he was dead when in fact he had been sold into slavery by his brothers. The brothers took Yosef’s tunic, dipped it into goat’s blood, and presented it to Yaakov as proof that Yosef was dead. Yaakov had fooled his father with the skin of a goat, the Zohar continues, for which reason he was tricked with the blood of a goat.

Now another incident in Yaakov’s life though not as serious as the previous ones, also gives us pause.

After being fooled into marrying the older sister Leah, Lavan makes Yaakov work another seven years for the woman he wanted from the start: Rachel. (By the way, note that Yaakov, who “tricked” Esav, is now in turn tricked by Lavan.) Yaakov continues to work, shepherding Lavan’s sheep, and the terms of his wages are discussed. The dark-colored, speckled and spotted sheep that are born from henceforth shall belong to Yaakov; the other, regular-colored sheep shall belong to Lavan.

Now Yaakov took poplar and almond shoots, peeled white strips in them and put them where the goats and sheep came to drink. The goats mated by these rods, and lo and behold, their offspring was speckled and spotted. More and more goats and sheep were born that belonged to Yaakov, and soon he became wealthy. Again it seems that Yaakov is using some kind of gimmick or trick to get his way.

But here too, a careful reading of the text shows us Yaakov’s reason. Lavan kept changing the condition. Any time things were going in Yaakov’s favor, the deal was changed. So, in truth, Yaakov was defending himself against the manipulations of his uncle.

At this point, seeing that his nephew is getting the upper hand, Lavan gets really angry at him. Yaakov decides to leave without telling Lavan. Rachel steals her father’s idol, perhaps to wean him away from idolatry, perhaps to prevent him from using occult practices to divine where Yaakov was.

Lavan pursues Yaakov, but Hashem appears to him and warns him not to harm Yaakov. Upon overtaking Yaakov, Lavan accuses him of running away and also of stealing his flocks.

Yaakov responds by saying he was afraid that Lavan would take away his daughters, i.e., Yaakov’s wives. As far as stealing, Yaakov is confident that none of his people stole the gods and says, “If anyone has them, they shall die.”

Lavan then proceeds to thoroughly search all of Yaakov’s possessions and finds nothing stolen. (Rachel had hidden the gods under the camel’s cushion.)

Now Yaakov describes to Lavan how honestly he worked for him for 20 years. It is this description of Yaakov’s integrity that sheds light on his true personality. It should be emphasized that he made these statements to Lavan, and Lavan did not contradict him. He merely asserted that Yaakov had no reason to fear him as he would never have harmed his daughters or his grandchildren.

Here is what Yaakov said: “You rummaged through all my things. What have you found from all your household…? These 20 years I have spent in your service, your ewes and she-goats never miscarried, nor did I feast on rams from your flock. That which was torn by beasts I never brought to you; I myself made good the loss you would have exacted from me, whether snatched by day or snatched by night. Scorching heat ravaged me by day and frost by night, and sleep fled from my eyes… and you changed the terms of my wages tens of times.”

Yaakov was cheated into marrying Leah. His wages were constantly being changed, and yet he was absolutely scrupulous in working honestly. Sometimes a shepherd drives his flock on relentlessly, and the ewes miscarry. But here “they never miscarried.” Sometimes a shepherd is far from town, and, in order to eat, he picks an old ram, slaughters and eats it. But here “nor did I feast upon rams from your flock.” If an animal is torn by wild beasts, the shepherd brings part of the remains to show the owner and thus be exonerated from payment. But here “Torn by beasts I never brought to you. I, myself, made good the loss.” Sheep that are penned in at night and stolen are not the responsibility of the shepherd. But here Yaakov paid for “snatched by day or snatched by night.”

Instead of begrudging his bad boss and being lax in his job, Yaakov works day and night. He takes full responsibility for all damage and pays for it. Yaakov is absolutely confident that nothing has been stolen from Lavan’s house. He set high standards of honesty for himself and his household and was confident that there were no pilferers in his family.

As mentioned above, Lavan did not contest Yaakov’s affirmation. He, too, recognized Yaakov’s integrity.

This casts light on Yaakov’s other actions as stated above. In real life, there are sometimes decisions to be made on complex, many-sided issues. Sometimes the right choice to make does not look good, but it is the right choice nonetheless. If the one making those difficult choices is a person of integrity, his sense of justice and of right will lead him to the right choice. Yaakov was a man of integrity who had many hard decisions to make. Upon those decisions rested the future existence of the Jewish people. Yaakov chose and succeeded in being the progenitor of Am Yisroel, the people of “Israel,” the people of Yaakov.