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## The Character of Yaakov

### Vayeitzei

What kind of man was Yaakov? This is the question that cries out to us in episode after episode of his life.

The first time we hear a description of him he is called **ISH TAM**: a simple, quiet, plain, straightforward man. But that is exactly what he seems not to be. We see him taking Eisav's birthright in exchange for a bowl of soup. We see him taking Eisav's blessing, in borrowed clothes, taking advantage of their father's blindness.

These are troubling episodes. We can read them midrashically. The Midrash makes Yaakov all-good and Eisav all-bad. It rereads the biblical text to make it consistent with the highest standards of the moral life. There is much to be said for this approach.

Alternatively, we could say that in these cases the end justifies the means. In the case of the birthright, Yaakov might have been testing Eisav to see if he really cared about it. Since he gave it away so readily, Yaakov might be right in concluding

that it should go to one who valued it. In the case of the blessing, Yaakov was obeying his mother, who had received a Divine oracle saying that "the older shall serve the younger."

Yet the text remains disturbing. Yitzchak says to Eisav, "Your brother came deceitfully and took your blessing." Eisav says, "Isn't he rightly named Yaakov [supplanter]? He has supplanted me these two times: He took my birthright, and now he's taken my blessing!" Such accusations are not levelled against any other biblical hero.

Nor does the story end there. In this week's parsha a similar deceit is practiced on him. After his wedding night, he discovers that he has married Leah, not, as he thought, his beloved Rachel. He complains to Lavan:

"What is this you have done to me? Was it not for Rachel that I served you? Why then have you deceived me?" (B'reishit 29:25)

Lavan replies:

"It is not done in our place to give the younger before the firstborn." (29:26)

It's hard not to see this as precise measure-for-measure retribution. The younger Yaakov pretended to be the older Eisav. Now the elder Leah

has been disguised as the younger Rachel. A fundamental principle of biblical morality is at work here: As you do, so shall be done to you.

Yet the web of deception continues. After Rachel has given birth to Yosef, Yaakov wants to return home. He has been with Lavan long enough. Lavan urges him to stay and tells him to name his price. Yaakov then embarks on an extraordinary course of action. He tells Lavan he wants no wages at all. Let Lavan remove every spotted or streaked lamb from the flock, and every streaked or spotted goat. Yaakov will then keep, as his hire, any new born spotted or streaked animals.

It is an offer that speaks simultaneously to Lavan's greed and his ignorance. He seems to be getting Yaakov's labour for almost nothing. He is demanding no wages. And the chance of unspotted animals giving birth to spotted offspring seems remote.

Yaakov knows better. In charge of the flocks, he goes through an elaborate procedure involving peeled branches of poplar, almond, and plane trees, which he places with their drinking water. The result is that they do in fact produce streaked and spotted offspring.

How this happened has intrigued not only the commentators (who mostly assume that it was a miracle, God's way of assuring Yaakov's welfare) but also scientists. Some argue that Yaakov must have had an understanding of genetics. Two unspotted sheep can produce spotted offspring. Yaakov had doubtless noticed this in his many years of tending Lavan's flocks.

Others have suggested that prenatal nutrition can have an epigenetic effect - that is, it can cause a certain gene to be expressed which might not have been otherwise. Had the peeled branches of poplar, almond, and plane trees been added to the water the sheep drank, they might have affected the Agouti gene that determines the colour of fur in sheep and mice.

However it happened, the result was dramatic. Yaakov became rich:

In this way the man grew exceedingly prosperous and came to own large flocks, and maidservants and menservants, and camels and donkeys (30:43).

Inevitably, Lavan and his sons felt cheated. Yaakov sensed their displeasure, and - having taken counsel with his wives and being advised to leave by God Himself -

departs while Lavan is away sheep-shearing. Lavan eventually discovers that Yaakov has left, and pursues him for seven days, catching up with him in the mountains of Gil'ad.

The text is fraught with accusation and counteraccusation. Lavan and Yaakov both feel cheated. They both believe that the flocks and herds are rightfully theirs. They both regard themselves as the victim of the other's deceitfulness. The end result is that Yaakov finds himself forced to run away from Lavan as he was earlier forced to run away from Eisav, in both cases in fear of his life.

So the question returns. What kind of man was Yaakov? He seems anything but an ISH TAM, a straightforward man. And surely this is not the way for a religious role model to behave - in such a way that first his father, then his brother, then his father-in-law, accuse him of deceit. What kind of story is the Torah telling us in the way it narrates the life of Yaakov?

One way of approaching an answer is to look at a specific character - often a hare, or in African-American tradition, "Brer Rabbit" - in the folktales of oppressed people. Henry Louis Gates, the American literary critic, has argued that such figures represent "the creative way the slave

community responded to the oppressor's failure to address them as human beings created in the image of God." They have "a fragile body but a deceptively strong mind." Using their intelligence to outwit their stronger opponents, they are able to deconstruct and subvert, in small ways, the hierarchy of dominance favouring the rich and the strong. They represent the momentary freedom of the unfree, a protest against the random injustices of the world.

That, it seems to me, is what Yaakov represents in this, the early phase of his life. He enters the world as the younger of two twins. His brother is strong, ruddy, hairy, a skilful hunter, a man of the open country, whereas Yaakov is quiet, a scholar. Then he must confront the fact that his father loves his brother more than him. Then he finds himself at the mercy of Lavan, a possessive, exploitative, and deceptive figure who takes advantage of his vulnerability. Yaakov is the man who - as almost all of us do at some time or other - finds that life is unfair.

What Yaakov shows, by his sheer quick-wittedness, is that the strength of the strong can also be their weakness. So it is when Eisav comes in exhausted from the hunt,

famished, that he is willing to impulsively trade his birthright for some soup. So it is when the blind Yitzchak is prepared to bless the son who will bring him venison to eat. So it is when Lavan hears the prospect of getting Yaakov's labour for free. Every strength has its Achilles' heel, its weakness, and this can be used by the weak to gain victory over the strong.

Yaakov represents the refusal of the weak to accept the hierarchy created by the strong. His acts are a form of defiance, an insistence on the dignity of the weak (vis-a-vis Eisav), the less loved (by Yitzchak), and the refugee (in Lavan's house). In this sense he is one element of what, historically, it has been like to be a Jew.

But the Yaakov we see in these chapters is not the figure whom, ultimately, we are called on to emulate. We can see why. Yaakov wins his battles with Eisav and Lavan but at the cost of eventually having to flee in fear of his life. Quick-wittedness is merely a temporary solution.

It is only later, after his wrestling match with the angel, that he receives a new name - that is, a new identity - as Israel, "because you have struggled with God and with men and have overcome." As Israel he

is unafraid to contend with people face-to-face. He no longer needs to outwit them by clever but ultimately futile stratagems. His children will eventually become the people whose dignity lies in the unbreakable covenant they make with God.

Yet we can see something of Yaakov's early life in one of the most remarkable features of Jewish history. For almost two thousand years Jews were looked down on as pariahs, yet they refused to internalise that image, just as Yaakov refused to accept the hierarchies of power or affection that condemned him to be a mere second-best. Jews throughout history, like Yaakov, have relied not on physical strength or material wealth but on qualities of the mind.

In the end, though, Yaakov must become Israel. For it is not the quick-witted victor but the hero of moral courage who stands tall in the eyes of humanity and God.

### **Around the Shabbat Table:**

- (1) **Can you think of a time in your life when your belief system was challenged, and you needed to advocate for your values or principles?**
- (2) **What other times in Sefer**

B'reishit and the greater Tanach have name changes and the importance of recognising a name come up?

- (3) What helps guide you when you are confronted with a morally complex decision? In what ways can you relate your experience to Yaakov's story?

יהי זכרו ברוך