

A Weekly Byte... from Isralight (Vayetze)

Small Tastings of Torah, Judaism and Spirituality
From Rav Binny

Koach hataya; literally: 'a force of deception'. One of the most difficult roles a soldier can assume in any engagement. This is the force designated to draw the enemy out of hiding, or to commit its forces, so that the usually larger force hidden in the wings can then destroy it.

I once met a fellow who had fought in the Vietnam War who had been part of just such a unit, fighting deep in the jungles of Vietnam, in the Tet offensive of 1968. The mission of their unit was to draw the enemy out of hiding so that larger US forces could then engage and destroy them.

He was very good at what he did, and often he was sent ahead on point, with the task of making enough noise to draw the enemy out....

He recalled on one occasion being able to feel the eyes of a thousand enemy soldiers watching him as he walked down a foot path in the jungle. His entire mission that day had been to act as though he was completely unaware of them, as he walked, so as to lull them into thinking they were completely hidden, allowing his unit to call in the airstrike that would turn their jungle hideout into an instant inferno of fire and destruction just moments later.

He told me that after living a life so immersed in deception and cunning it had taken him some time to readjust to civilian life where truth and honesty could replace the deception his life had inevitably become.

Where indeed is the fine line between truth and deception?

This week, we will encounter the figure in the bible that most represents deception: Lavan, who will become the father in law of Yaakov. In one of the vilest deceptions in the Torah, he will actually switch sisters on Yaakov, tricking him into marrying Leah the older sister, instead of Rachel, the love of Yaakov's life whom he had intended to marry. Indeed, Jewish tradition suggests that the name Lavan which means 'white' represents the most reprehensible form of deception: the two-faced lie, wherein someone pretends to be a friend, whilst all the time scheming behind the scenes.

What is more dishonorable after all, than the politician who says one thing in public, while strategizing precisely the opposite behind closed doors?

And who is not deeply challenged by the Arab statesmen who stand in the corridors of Washington professing a desire for peace with the Jews while preaching hatred for them in the Arab press and children's schoolbooks?

And yet, Yaakov himself, the victim of Lavan's trickery, was no stranger to the field, himself deceiving his own brother Esau out of the blessings in last week's portion, for which Jewish tradition seems to exonerate him.

So what is the fine line between vile deception and honest strategy? Why is Yaakov revered in Jewish tradition as the paragon of truth, whilst Lavan is considered the epitome of deception?

There is a fascinating idea that comes from the Vilna Gaon in his *Even Sheleimah*. It concerns how we make the choices that govern our lives. Most people assume that the Torah will always tell us what to do, but that is simply not true. Imagine a person is struggling with whether to become a doctor or a lawyer. Judaism may teach me **how** to behave as a doctor or a lawyer, but Halacha (Jewish law) does not presume to suggest **whether** to be a doctor or a lawyer.

The Vilna Gaon suggests there are two parts to every decision: there is objectively a better decision (I am either better suited to be a doctor or a lawyer). But there is also the question of *why* I am making the decision: what are my motivations....

If I make the objectively right decision (if objectively I am better suited to be a lawyer and decide to study law) but make it for the wrong reasons (to make more money?) it will end up being the wrong decision.

But if I make the objectively wrong decision (i.e. I'm really more suited to be a doctor) but make it for the right reasons (nonetheless choosing to study law because I feel that is how I can best help others...) it will end up being the right decision. So just make sure your decisions are for the right reasons. (On this topic Judaism actually does have a lot to say...)

And this, perhaps, was what separated Lavan and Yaakov.

Lavan's decisions were all about Lavan. He tricked Yaakov into marrying both Leah and Rachel, saving himself a dowry and gaining a free laborer. And he chased after Yaakov when he left after 22 years, not wanting to lose his steady source of income, as well as the future workforce represented by Yaakov's many children. Even back when he participated in negotiations with Avraham's servant Eliezer to allow his (Lavan's) sister Rivkah to leave home and marry Yitzchak, it was never about what Lavan could give; it was always about what he could get.

Yaakov on the other hand, tricks Esau out of the blessings at the behest of his mother Rivkah, complying because the future of the Jewish people depended on its being led by a Yaakov instead of an Esau. He knows the risk of retribution will be enormous. Indeed, he will be forced to leave home and begin a long exile as a result. And he is willing to give many more years of service to Lavan because of his love (itself all about giving) for Rachel. It was never about Yaakov; it was always much bigger than Yaakov; it was about what Yaakov could give to the world; which is really what truth is all about. There can only be an objective truth if there is an objective source: G-d; from whom truth emanates. And Yaakov is all about sharing G-dliness with the world.

Indeed, this may well be the source of the current conflict we find ourselves in our modern State of Israel.

Jews of all shapes and stripes genuinely want peace, and we have been willing to give up so much in order to achieve that peace.

But sadly, for the most part, there seems to be no-one to talk to, because the Arabs who represent the other side are only concerned with what they can get and there is not even a discussion about what they have to give. If a Mahmoud Abbas can profess to want peace on the one hand, but insist a Palestinian state will be Judenrein on the other; if while discussing peace objectives in Washington he is inciting hatred in Ramallah then his deception is not about what he can give but only about what he can get. (Which is why it is not surprising that the so called Palestinian leadership has siphoned billions of dollars away from their people to line their own bank vaults. To this day, the 970 million dollars it is estimated Yasser Arafat amassed during his career as head of the PLO has never been recovered.)

One day, perhaps we will meet an Arab leadership that wants to give, more than it wants to get. Until then, we need, as a Jewish people, to model a world of giving, while employing the cunning of Yaakov to ensure the Jewish will continue to have what to give.

Shabbat Shalom from Jerusalem,

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