

Ya'akov Avinu & the Perennial Battle Against Evil

By HaRav Ariel Bar Tzadok

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With all the stereotypes, prejudice, fears and awe that surround the Jewish people, no one exemplifies the Jewish archetype more than Ya'akov Avinu. Wisely did our Sages say that "ma'aseh Avot siman labanim" (the actions of the Fathers are a sign for their children).

Ya'akov Avinu, more than any other Jew sums up the life of all Jews. His triumphs and his failures, his highs and lows are those which we experience every day. Therefore, a careful study of the events of his life, learning from his life experience, prepares us to better live our own lives as Jews.

The name Ya'akov (from Akov, ayin, kof bet) means deceiver or deceptive (Alcalay Heb.-Eng. Dict. Pg. 1949). While we indeed see Ya'akov deceiving his brother Esav out of both the rights of the firstborn and his paternal blessing, we also see Ya'akov being deceived by his Uncle Lavan who duped him into marrying Leah. The old saying seems here to be applicable, "what goes around, comes around" or as our holy Rabbis have taught "midah k'neged midah" (measure for measure). As Ya'akov deceived, so was he himself deceived. Yet, as Ya'akov only deceived for the sake of a higher spiritual good, so was he deceived for the sake of that same higher spiritual good - midah k'neged midah.

According to Midrash, after Ya'akov left Be'er Sheva on his way to his Uncle Lavan in Haran, he stopped in the Yeshiva of Ever (son of Shem) and there studied for fourteen years. Only after this time does he go to Haran. During these fourteen years, Ya'akov must have matured a tremendous amount for immediately upon arriving in Haran, he falls in love with Rahel and bargains for her hand in marriage. Although he may have been mature in this area, he had a rude awakening seven years later when Lavan deceived him with Leah. Mind you, this is not the last time Ya'akov is portrayed as being deceived. Years later, his own sons deceived him for a total of 22 years, hiding from him the fact that his beloved son Yosef was still alive. Nowhere does the Torah portray any punishment being dealt out to Ya'akov's sons for their actions. However, the Ari'zal teaches that the "Eserah Harugei Hamalkhut" (the ten holy Rabbis martyred by the Romans) were the reincarnation of Yosef's brothers, then being punished for what they did in their past lives.

The role of deception, honesty, more deception and more honesty seem to be the course of events in Ya'akov's life. It might be argued that this is also the course of the history of the Jewish people throughout time. The Jewish people have had periods of being righteous, then wicked, then righteous again, then wicked again.

There are varying grades of deception. When Lavan asked Ya'akov to name his wages, Ya'akov asked for all the sheep that were to be born speckled, spotted and streaked. In order to deceive him, Lavan



removed all such sheep from his flock so that they should not multiply. Ya'aqov on the other hand, not to be out done by Lavan uses some mystical powers involving rods in water troughs to make sure that all the solid colored sheep would bare speckled, spotted and streaked offspring, which they did. Ya'aqov therefore received a tremendous amount of livestock, while Lavan's fortune greatly diminished. Ya'aqov's maneuver was definitely tricky, as was Lavan's. Ya'aqov gave it back to Lavan midah k'neged midah. Apparatly, this is the only way Ya'aqov ever made any progress in his life. The art of the deal seemed to pursue him all the days of his life.

We must ask what is it about Ya'aqov that made him this way? What changed in him to turn Ya'aqov into Yisrael? In addition, what is there for us to learn here that might offer insight into how we should understand ourselves as Jews and how can we better improve our lives?

The live of Ya'aqov Avinu was an expression of powerful spiritual forces of holiness and how they interact upon Earth in its present fallen state. One thing must be made clear, nothing exists in a bubble. In one way or another everything is interrelated and interconnected. The upper dimensional planes, (which we call Heaven, in which reside such entities as angels and neshamot) interact with the lower dimensional planes (in which reside physical entities and those which we refer to as demons) in a very precise but yet almost invert manner.

Whatever exists above also exists correspondingly below. This is a sound and true spiritual principle outlined for us in the holy Zohar. Yet, the Zohar and the kitvei HaAri'zal are also just as clear in describing a state of inversion, a reversal of sorts from high levels of pure holiness to low levels of pure uncleanness. Our physical level and we humans in it are much closer to the lower planes that we are to the higher planes. Nonetheless, all the dimensional planes interact with one another. So ultimately, we find varying dimensional manifestations in each individual plane. Ya'aqov Avinu is a clear case in point.

Although born second, here in this physical world, the soul of Ya'aqov, above in the higher planes was indeed that of the firstborn. While the soul of Ya'aqov emanated from a high source in holiness, the soul of his twin brother Esav emanated equally yet oppositely from a low source in uncleanness. These two opposing dimensional planes were both thus manifest here upon the earth however unequally. The earth thus became the battlefield for these two opposing forces to meet and fight. Here on earth strengthened evil and weakened good "duke it out" to the end.

The problem is that since the earth is closer to the forces of evil as opposed to the forces of holiness, the forces of evil dominate here on earth far more than do the powers of holiness. Thus, Esav was born first because the forces of evil, those more predominant here on earth, manipulated the children in the womb to manifest a reality more to their liking. This reflected the fallen state manifest here on earth, but it did not manifest the reality as it exists in the higher dimensions. This then became the story of Ya'aqov's whole life.

Ya'aqov was the agent of good. As such, the forces of evil pursued him at every turn seeking his harm and destruction. Ya'aqov fought the forces of evil with his G-d given talent of intelligence. Ya'aqov was granted this gift from G-d to know and understand the methods used by the forces of evil to dominate this world. If the forces of evil wish to seek their own ends, then Ya'aqov in his wisdom foresaw how to defeat them. He knew that one must fight "fire with fire." As was his right as a master of holiness, the true dominant force in the multiple dimensional universes, Ya'aqov could deceive the deceivers and pay back the forces of evil midah k'neged midah (measure for measure).

As we have learned "ma'aseh Avot siman labanim" (the actions of the Fathers are a sign for their children). What we learn from Ya'aqov Avinu is how to deal with the forces of evil that surround us. Indeed, while this is a lesson for the entire Jewish people, the Benei Noah must also learn these lessons in order that we all be protected from the snares of deception. The forces of evil that surrounded Ya'aqov, even from before birth endeavored to destroy him through their most powerful weapon - deception. In this inverse and opposite physical world of ours, Ya'aqov the first born, was born second. Esav the man on the bottom rose to the top. Such is the nature of this inverted dimensional plane (our physical universe) that reflects mirror-like reverse images of the holy dimensional planes "above."

The forces of evil are referred to as the “Sitra Ahra” in Zoharic literature. This is literally translated as the “Other Side.” However, I prefer a more modern term, which I borrow, and refer to the Sitra Ahra as the “Dark Side.” The Dark Side is a living and vibrant G-d ordained force in this and other universes. Unlike Christian theology (mythology), based upon pagan (Persian) Zoroastrianism, Torah does not teach that the forces of good and evil are equal and are battling for control of the universe.

According to Torah, such a view is blasphemous and outright idolatry. G-d forbid to think that there is any power in the universe that could ever possibly challenge the Holy One, blessed be He. G-d created evil as the prophet Isaiah said. Evil was created to serve G-d’s purpose in creation. Indeed, evil is one of G-d’s most faithful servants, never wavering from fulfilling the role created for it by its master.

As the dimensional planes move farther away from the source of Divinity each one becomes more “Dark” (evil) and less “Light” (holy). This can be compared to turning something inside out, so that the lowest dimensional plane will be the exact opposite of the highest. In this way, every potential and possibility for being, whether good or evil, has the ability and the place in which to exist.

Next come life forms, which can choose by their actions where it is they want to live and in what form of living creature they wish to be. This explains why there exist forces of evil, in their various forms, be they “fallen” angels, demons, or disembodied spirits. Mind you, as there are different races of mankind amongst the human species, so are there different species of angels and demons.

Both the holy Zohar and RaMBaM in his Hilchot Yesodei Torah outline ten different species (types or races) of angels. Other works such as Sefer Hesed L’Avraham, Pardes Rimonim and the Tziyuni outline the different races of “Dark Side” beings. Our holy Rabbanim teach us that these entities are real. Their existence and interactions amongst us is real. Ya’aqov Avinu saw this in his vision of the ladder and experienced it all too well when he had to physically battle Esav’s guardian angel, who was none other than the Satan himself.

As Ya’aqov’s children we too must become aware of the Dark Side forces that surround us and which endeavor to make our lives miserable, even as they did to Ya’aqov Avinu. Remember, after being united with Yosef, Ya’aqov was asked by Pharaoh, how old he was. Ya’aqov answered that he 130 years old and that they were “ra’im” (bad). While G-d did keep His word to Ya’aqov and blessed him greatly, nonetheless, he “paid his dues in full.” Ya’aqov led a very difficult and often bitter life. We Jews find ourselves all too often facing similar types of tragedies as did Ya’aqov Avinu. Yet, we have his life’s story to guide us. He did not have such an opportunity. Therefore, we can learn from the past and prepare the future, before mistakes are made.

The nature of evil is to use the art of deception from disabling desiring souls from ascending into the higher dimensions in order to draw near the side of Light. As Jews, our job is not only to draw ourselves towards the Light, but also to bring the Light here into this world. In this world dominated by Darkness as it is, Light is not a welcome guest.

Ya’aqov Avinu was the archetypal agent of the Light. As such, he was the targeted enemy of the Dark Side. They sought every means to dispossess Ya’aqov of his mission. They struck at him when a boy making him a second born. They make his brother hate him. They made him have to flee his home, never to see his beloved mother again. They made him have to deal with a lousy and deceptive uncle who at every turn sought to cheat him. They challenged him with the death of his beloved wife Rachel and the rape of his beloved daughter Dinah. Only then did Ya’aqov face his greatest challenge, the 22-year separation from his beloved son Yosef.

For 22 years, Ya’aqov Avinu mourned Yosef. For 22 years, not even G-d could reach Ya’aqov to tell him that Yosef was alive. Today we would say that Ya’aqov Avinu entered a state of deep depression. G-d cannot communicate with a human mind clouded with depression. Thus until Ya’aqov heard word that Yosef was alive, it is as if even G-d had abandoned him. Such are the trials of the Tzadik who wishes to bring Light into Darkness. Light and Darkness wage a real war in which we are the soldiers. There are real victors and real casualties.

Understand now a great secret. As Shlomo HaMelekh has said, "there is nothing new under the sun." The same techniques of destruction that the Dark Side used against Ya'aqov Avinu they use against his children. Today we Jews are faced with the same enemy trying to use deception against us to bring us down from our lofty heights as Benei Torah (Orthodox Torah faithful Jews). Today, the Dark Side still endeavors to deceive the non-Jewish world into believing that we Jews are all types of cheapskates, deceivers, liars and sex perverts, who own all the world's banks and are always just one step away from total world domination.

Just as Lavan learned to fear Ya'aqov so now the nations of the world fear the Jews, and with us the State of Israel, the nation of the Jews. Deception is the tool of our enemy. We must never allow it in to our domain. For if we allow deception into our lives, whether it be to deceive ourselves, or others, whether in personal matters or business matters, we have invited the Dark Side to take up its abode with us. This is allowing our mortal enemy into our front door. It is similar to inviting into your home a known and wanted terrorist. The outcome for you and your family will be certain.

We are however permitted to fight fire with fire. When faced with a deceptive enemy we may deal with the enemy on the enemy's own turf. It is permitted to deceive a deceiver as long as one is serving the higher good of Torah and Mitzvot. One must be extremely careful however not to fool oneself into justifying forbidden behavior. It is a fine line we walk, a razor's edge between good and evil. Yet, this is who Ya'aqov Avinu was and still is. In the mystical tree of the Sefirot, Ya'aqov's place is in the sefirat Tiferet, which is the center of the tree and its heart. Forever does he stand between Hesed (mercy) and Gevurah (severity). Ya'aqov - Tiferet is the center column, the balance of all. Tiferet is also the source of the Torah and of justice. These are the attributes of Ya'aqov and must be the attributes of we his children.

We must always embody the Torah and be righteous before our Creator, even as was our father Ya'aqov, upon him be peace. Like him we must merit and live up to the name Yisrael, a prince before G-d. In addition, like him, we must know when and how to fight deceptive fire with deceptive fire. With Ya'aqovian craft we must deal with the Esavs and Lavans of today who endeavor to harm the Torah and the Jewish people. While being innocent and righteous, at the same time we must be crafty and wise. This is the balance embodied in Ya'aqov Avinu and what must be found in us his children. This is the secret of Jewish survival.