

Toldot: “Deception, skulls, and measure-for-measure retribution”

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The sidrah *Toldot* tells of Esau’s sale of his birthright to his brother, Jacob, in exchange for a lentil stew. One might have thought that a son who so devalued such a privilege deserved to forfeit it, but Esau conveniently conceals from his father, Isaac, the fact that he had bartered away his rightful blessing and says nothing when Isaac asks him to “go and hunt for me venison, that my soul may bless you before I die” (Gen. 27:3).

A great deal of deception went on in that household; and poor father Isaac was its primary focus. Esau deceives him into imagining that the firstborn is still his to inherit. Jacob deceives him when he dresses up in Esau’s rough hunting gear and pretends to be his brother. And his wife, Rebecca – who should have known better – is at the centre of the intrigue as the one who persuades Jacob to disguise himself in Esau’s clothes and wrest the blessing from Isaac.

Judaism believes in the doctrine of ‘measure for measure’- *middah k’neged middah* – namely, that human actions, positive or negative, generate a reciprocal divine response in the form of a respective blessing or act retribution. And the Torah highlights four examples of this principle at work in the lives of both Isaac and Jacob, with deceit as their common link.

Extra pathos is given to the events through their literary structure whereby the two accounts of the deception relating to Isaac (26:1-11; 12-31) are inserted, parenthetically, between the two episodes describing Jacob’s purchase of the birthright (25:19-34) and his seizure of the initiative to pre-empt his brother from receiving it (ch.27), with the Jacob events serving as a literary envelope for the former.¹

The first Isaac episode (26:1-33) describes his sojourn in the Philistine city of Gerar, together with his beautiful wife, Rebecca, and how he begs her to deceive the locals into believing that she was his sister, since, were the incomers identified as man and wife, they might kill Isaac so as to release her for entry into the King Avimelech's harem.

After some time, when the couple realised that no one was molesting them, Isaac felt safe in revealing their relationship publicly. However, shortly afterwards, when, from the vantage point of his palace, Avimelech saw Isaac and Rebecca cavorting as a married couple, his anger was aroused at the deceit. He summoned Isaac and reprimanded him, saying, "What have you done to us? One of the people (*achad ha-am*) – a euphemism for his own royal person² – might have carnally seized your wife, and you would have brought guilt upon us" (26:10).

The second Isaac episode (vv.12-33) mirrors the previous theme of misrepresentation and envy. This time, it was not regarding the single or marital state of Rebecca and the king's envy of Isaac and desire for his wife, but over the wealth, land, and livestock, that Isaac amassed in Philistia and which had aroused the envy of the local population (see v.14). This reached such a pass that they resorted to 'misrepresentation,' denying Isaac's right of ownership to the land and the wells he had dug on it with the public proclamation, *lanu ha-mayyim*, 'the water is ours!' (v.20).

As there was no other reason to insert the two 'Isaac in Philistia' episodes into the self-contained story of Jacob's double deception of both Esau and his father, Isaac, we may assume that the Torah's intention was to create a seamless thematic link between all four episodes in exemplification of the principle of 'measure for measure.' Its objective would have been to emphasise that the deceit, strife, and hatred, that both Isaac and Jacob suffered

was retribution for the fact that both father and son had resorted to deception instead of having had faith in God's protection.

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THE PRINCIPLE OF MEASURE FOR MEASURE

This principle, which Shakespeare took as the title of one of his well-known plays, and which is a most familiar theme in world literature, was graphically enunciated by the most illustrious Patriarch of ancient Israel, Hillel the Elder (110 BCE – 10 CE

Seeing a skull floating on the water, he [Hillel] observed

- *al di'ateft atifuch, v'sof m'tayfayich yetufun* – “Because

you drowned others, they drowned you; and those who drowned

you will themselves eventually be drowned.”³

It will be noted that the language of Hillel's six-word bitter observation is Aramaic, whereas the adjoining three teachings, as quoted in his name in this chapter of Mishnah *Avot*, are in pure Hebrew (see M. *Avot* 2:5, 6, 8). We may explain this, however, in relation to the fact that Hillel lived in Babylon until the age of forty, and Aramaic had become the dominant language there – as it had throughout the Near East – centuries earlier.

We suggest that his lapse into his original tongue may be attributed to the fact that, as psychologists point out, a foreigner who has mastered his or her host country's language may occasionally revert to the mother tongue for various nuanced psychological reasons. Being that the latter is intrinsically linked to one's core identity, childhood

memories, and emotional experiences, speaking it can feel more authentic and emotionally resonant than the learned language. Given that Hillel was clearly emotionally troubled at the sight of the skull and the circumstances of the civil war – with Jew killing Jew – it is understandable why he lapsed into his Aramaic mother tongue.

It was during Hillel's leadership of the Judean community that a Hasmonean civil war ensued (circa 67-63 BCE) between the two rival factions of two brothers, Hyrcanus II and Aristobulus II. This division enabled the Roman general, Pompey, who sided with Hyrcanus, to gain control and conquer Jerusalem, thereby ending the rule of the Hasmonean dynasty.

His three-month siege of the city met with stiff resistance and thousands of Jewish defenders were slaughtered, with comparatively few casualties on the Roman side. It may be assumed that Hillel's bitter observation was made in relation to the corpse of one of the Jewish fighters and reflected his despair that brothers had been fighting against brothers in that tragic civil war.

The skull that set off Hillel's soliloquy is also evocative of the well-known scene in another of the bard's plays wherein Hamlet holds up the skull of a jester he had known in his youth. He accompanies this with a reflection on death, decay, the brevity of life, and the ironic situation that his friend, who had spent his life confidently mocking and creating parodies at the expense of countless others was now reduced to silence, unable to counter the insincere pity of all the former victims of his sharp barbs and wicked tongue.

*Alas, poor Yorick! I knew him, Horatio: a fellow of infinite jest, of
most excellent fancy: he hath borne me on his back a thousand
times; and now, how abhorred in my imagination it is! my gorge*

*rises at it. Here hung those lips that I have kissed I know not how
oft. Where be your gibes now? your gambols? your songs? your
flashes of merriment, that were wont to set the table on a roar? Not
one now, to mock your own grinning? Quite chap-fall'n?*

(Hamlet, Act 5, scene 1)

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It may be argued, however, that Isaac's actions might be justified on two counts: First, in that he was trying to save his life, an objective which, as a paramount consideration, assuredly justified resort to a misrepresentation of facts. Such a justification is indeed condoned with the Talmudic principle, *mutar leshanot mipnei ha-shalom*, 'It is acceptable to be economical with the truth in the pursuit of the restoration of peace and harmony.'⁴

Supportive examples provided by the Talmud include reference to God Himself who resorted to this when Sarah had laughed at the news given to her by the visiting angel that she would bear a child in her old age. She explained her mirth by noting that, "my husband is old" (Gen.18:10-12). However, when God reported Sarah's reaction to Abraham, He quoted her words as, "since *I* am old" (v.13) in order that Abraham should not regard what Sarah had said as a slight to him, and so that their marital harmony might not be disrupted.⁵ The inference is clearly that, if God was prepared to report a situation 'inaccurately' in the interest of peace, Isaac was certainly within his rights to do so as a life-saving measure!

The application of this principle may also be applied to God's instruction to Moses to go to Pharaoh and demand that he let the Israelites go '*on a three-day journey* in the wilderness to make an offering to the Lord our God' (Ex.3:18). The following verse – "But I know that the king of Egypt will not allow you to go except with a strong hand" – provides the justification

for the deceit that had to be inflicted on him. God began, therefore, with the simple request that Pharaoh could have granted without loosing face. Yes, it contained an element of deceit, but – as in the case of Isaac and Avimelech – that was ultimately a life-saving necessity, for, had the Israelites remained incarcerated in Egypt, they would have disappeared as a nation, and their God-given eternal mission would have been frustrated.

Secondly, Isaac was practising deceit within a society which was itself riddled with immorality, brutality (hence his fear for his life) and deceit. He would probably have had no compunction, therefore, about countering deviancy with deviancy. Such an attitude – that it is fair game to play deceivers at their own game – has no moral justification, however, as it reduces one to the level of the perpetrators. Ultimately, it is for heaven or the courts to grant them their just deserts.

Furthermore, Isaac and Rebecca should have had faith that God would protect them and frustrate the evil designs of the Philistines and their king. After all, higher – if not the highest – standards are expected of those who aspire to embrace faith and walk the moral path. Their punishment for that shortcoming may be related to the aggravation Rebecca suffered, and complained of bitterly to Isaac, from the Hittite wives of Esau who ruined their family life (see 27:46). Isaac, in addition, bore the brunt of the strife between Jacob and Esau, had to face the dilemma of Esau's anguish at having his blessing wrested from him by Jacob, and had to deal with his own sorrow at the latter's exile in fear of Esau's retribution (28:1-7).

NOTES

1. Though primarily employed in poetry, the A-B-B-A pattern of rhyming lines, called chiasmus (X), is also found in prose narrative to create a balanced, impactful effect. The structure of the four episodes we have highlighted - those of Jacob-Isaac-Isaac-Jacob – is clearly an example of this.

2. The identification of the phrase *achad ha-am*, ‘one of the people,’ with the king, follows the translation of the *Targumim Onkelos* and *Yonatan* – *dimyuchad b’amma*. ‘the most distinguished of the people’ – as quoted by Rashi on 26:10.

3. M. *Avot* 2:7.

4. Tal *Yev.* 63a.

5. Tal. *B.M.* 87a.

Shabbat shalom,

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Three-year back numbers of my Torah thoughts are available to download at www.rabbijeffrey.co.uk , and, as always, my appreciation is extended to my friend, Norman Jonas, for creating and managing my website from the outset. He can be contacted on 020 8950 7200.