

Parshat Vayetze

In this week's parsha, we grapple with one of life's biggest dilemmas: What is the appropriate answer to the question, "Does this dress make me look fat?"

In the conceit of the 2009 movie, 'The Invention of Lying,' everyone human being existing before Ricky Gervais would have said, "Yes, that dress does make you look fat." There simply was no alternative to the truth. Gervais' character is the first human to discover the ability to lie, which puzzles him. He describes his first lie as "I said something that wasn't," lacking even the word to describe what he has done. At the conclusion of the movie ~spoilers~, Gervais' character is happily married to a terrible cook and uses his newfound ability to tell her that her horrendous cooking is delicious. But is lying ever the correct and moral choice?

In reality, we know that lying and deception are ingrained in humans from our earliest era. Rabbi Uri laid the foundation for this drasha when he described the very first incident of untruth in Tanach – Hashem tells Adam not to eat from the tree, but Adam tells Chava not to touch the tree. The word 'lie' is a bit harsh for this circumstance, but the midrash makes the consequences clear – it's directly connected to the expulsion from Eden. Is it any wonder that after the sin, Adam and Chava try to hide it from Hashem?

From the start of Breisheet to its conclusion, human beings are consistently deceptive where Hashem is a paragon of disclosure. In 2006, I began sketching the outline of a series of lectures (or perhaps a book) that examined this curious juxtaposition in Sefer Breisheet – as Hashem attempts to teach us all to be honest, to be straightforward, to disclose as well as be truthful, humans consistently fail to learn this lesson. At that time, I wrote an outline and a couple of pages of notes. I got preoccupied with other Torah projects for a decade. Then, all of a sudden, last year, the subject of Lies (and the Lying Liars who tell them) began to feel suddenly relevant and contemporary.

Why do people – even good people – lie? What do they think they will gain from it? Are they correct? How do they rationalize their lies?

Parshat Vayetze is a leading example of this thesis (that Hashem discloses as humans deceive). This week's parsha opens with Hashem engaging with Yaakov through a famous dream. Hashem talks to Yaakov, shares with him the famed covenantal promise of children and the Land of Israel. In contrast, the humans in this week's parsha lie, trick, hoodwink, bamboozle and otherwise deceive others.

Public Liar #1 is Lavan the Arami (a-r-m). Judy Klitsner, a faculty member at the other Pardes (in Yerushalayim) points out that "Arami" requires just one letter move to turn into Lavan Ha'Ramai (r-m-a), Lavan the trickster. But he's, of course, not the only liar in this week's parsha.

When Yaakov arrives in Aram, the text devotes multiple psukim to describe the size of the stone covering the well he encounters, and the complex procedure of opening the well that requires many shepherds. Depending on how you count, a full four psukim are used to describe this, suggesting its significance. Those with romantic hearts use it to point to the near-miraculous strength Yaakov gains when he spies his love Rachel from afar, in that he can open the well on his own and give water to the flocks of his uncle and future father-in-law. But since I'm less romantic and more Vulcan, I prefer a different explanation: surely a better covering for the well could have been constructed? The tedious process was perhaps at least semi-deliberate, a way of making sure that one shepherd was not hoarding the entire community's resources. Even if this is a wise choice, it is indicative of a lack of trust between people.

The deceptions abound from there. Here is my attempt at an exhaustive list:

- 1) Lavan runs enthusiastically to greet Yaakov, kisses him, hugs him, etc., interpreted by classical parshanim as his attempt to find riches hidden on Yaakov's person. (There is textual evidence to support this theory, but whether you want to classify this as deception or just opportunism is your call.)
- 2) Lavan promises his daughter Rachel to Yaakov but gives him Leah.
- 3) The midrash fills in that Leah and Rachel must have participated in the deception, which we can imagine is true – how else would Lavan have gotten away with it?
- 4) Yaakov sets his price as 'dark colored sheep and spotted and speckled goats' then does some odd voodoo with a stick to cause only those kinds to be born, a tricky sort of way to enrich himself

at Lavan's expense (again, my inner Vulcan suggests that percentages would have been useful here.)

- 5) When it comes time to return to Eretz C'naan, Yaakov consults his wives Rachel and Leah, but not Lavan. He tells his wives that Lavan has changed his wages 10 times – promised one thing, then given another, what we contemporarily might call 'bait and switch'.
- 6) Rachel and Leah agree with Yaakov that it's time for a quick exit. They run away, really, 'steal away' in secret. “וַיִּגְנֹב יַעֲקֹב אֶת-לֵב”
 לָבָן הָאֲרָמִי עַל-בְּלִי הַגִּיד לוֹ כִּי בָרַח הוּא”
 English: 'Yaakov stole the heart of Lavan the Arami when he did not tell him he was running away.'
- 7) Meanwhile, Rachel steals her father's trafim “וַתִּגְנֹב רָחֵל”. The use of the same verb in two consecutive psukim is clearly deliberate.

While Lavan is chasing Yaakov, Hashem – again the paragon of transparency and disclosure – turns up again to tell Lavan not to mess with Yaakov. It is not just that Hashem is straightforward, it is also significant that He gives Lavan information that he needs to be successful: He clarifies that Lavan has nothing to gain by harming Yaakov. This deescalates the situation, since Lavan cares only about his own gain.

Lavan eventually catches up to his family, confronting Yaakov by using the same verb again: “לָמָּה נִחַבְתָּ לְבָרַח וַתִּגְנֹב אֹתִי” and “לָמָּה גִנַּבְתָּ אֹתִי-”
 אֱלֹהֵי” – Why did you mislead me and why did you steal my Gods?

While Yaakov now “comes clean” to Lavan, there are a few more deceptions left.

- 8) Yaakov does not know that Rachel took the terafim.
- 9) Rachel pretends to be indisposed to avoid being caught with the terafim.

Yaakov and Lavan are able to make a Brit and part amicably, concluding a parsha that is noteworthy both for the major role played by female characters and also for the sheer number of deceptions.

Now we must answer our questions we raised before. Why do these people lie? And why are some of these people good guys and some of them are bad guys? The two primary criteria appear to be motive and frequency.

First, Lavan. Lavan is uncomplicated. He is consumed by greed: when we first meet him when Eved Avraham comes to engage Rivka as a bride for Yitzchak, the text tells us clearly, (24:30) that the first thing Lavan noticed was the “the nose-ring and the bands on his sister’s arms,” Order matters in Tanach, and Lavan notices the jewelry first. His kindness to Avraham’s servant is dependent on the wealth he think he will be gaining. The commentaries make a connection to this incident when they suggest that he hugged Yaakov to see if he was wearing hidden jewelry. He switches the daughters, and switches the wages, because it is advantageous for him to do so. We can all agree his conduct is always fishy, even when it is not obviously so. With his conniving and his concern about appearances, Lavan would have fit in well on Desperate Housewives.

Next, we need to examine the tricky behavior and deceptions by Yaakov, Rachel and Leah. How are their behaviors different? In the Gemara in Megilla, (13b) this story is discussed at length. The Gemara suggests that when they met, Yaakov proposes to Rachel and she tells him, 'my father is a trickster.' Yaakov's response is "I am just as tricky as he is."

The Gemara then imagines that Rachel asks how it can be that a righteous person engages in deception, and he responds that it is permitted to be deceptive when dealing with deceptive people. I use the verb 'imagines' because the Gemara has him quoting a song David sings towards the end of Shmuel Bet, unbothered by any anachronism. The point is that Yaakov believes himself to be justified, and seems to be convincing Rachel their behavior is justified.

The story ends with Yaakov and Rachel cooking up a set of signs so he would know it was her. At the last moment, Rachel feels sympathy for Leah's impending humiliation when she is discovered to be the wrong wife, and tells her the signs. If you're keeping score, Yaakov and Rachel were planning to deceive Lavan, but at the last second Rachel pivots and deceives Yaakov instead. Desperate housewives have nothing on this family. BTW, the Talmud praises Rachel for her 'modesty' in making this deceptive choice.

A few of my favorite lines in Tanach are in this week's parsha, including the morning after, where the Tanach says,

“וַיְהִי בַבֹּקֶר וְהִנֵּה הוּא לְאֵה” And it was in the morning, and behold it was Leah! The person Yaakov confronts is Lavan, to whom he says “וְלָמָּה רָמִיתָנִי:” – why have you deceived me?

While the midrash has a lot of subtext to add about this encounter, the text itself makes it pretty clear that Yaakov has this coming, with another of the greatest lines,

“וַיֹּאמֶר לְבִן לֹא-יַעֲשֶׂה כֵן בְּמִקְוָמֵנוּ לְתֵת הַצְעִירָה לְפָנֵי הַבְּכִירָה:”

“Lavan said, “It is not done HERE in OUR place to give the younger before the elder.” The criticism of Yaakov’s previous actions – regardless of any justifications – is clearly the subtext of the pasuk.

The commentaries are strangely silent on Leah’s conduct in all of this. No one criticizes her. She is not fundamentally a tricky person and it is likely she had very little choice in the situation. Lavan can’t have been the easiest father to deal with under the best of circumstances, and Jane Austen has already told us all we need to know about older, unmarried sisters and their life choices or lack thereof.

The most instructive thing is that Leah is not especially prone to future deception. Perhaps she does negotiate to swap flowers for a night with her husband much in the manner that Yaakov swapped soup for the Bechora, and perhaps she is a willing participant in the escape from Aram, but we don’t have further evidence of outright deception.

In contrast, Rachel appears to have inherited the trait of deception from her father. In her theft of the terafim, the commentaries tell us she was trying to keep Lavan from doing future A”Z (again, justifying

deception because of good intentions.) Ibn Ezra says this can't be the case, because why would she have kept them? She could have discarded them on the roadside. Rather, he says, they were oracles of some kind and she was afraid Lavan would use them to find them. Again, we can justify her reasoning and intentions, but the story does not end well. The midrash tells us that she died because of this deception – because her husband vows that whoever has the terafim will die. So she dies, after childbirth, on the journey. In a few weeks, I will have a thing or two to say about finding reasons why women die in childbirth, but for now, I'd like to return to the original questions I asked:

Is it ever ok to lie? Can we justify deception because we are dealing with difficult circumstances (like Leah) or surrounded by other deceivers (like Yaakov) or have pure motives (like Rachel)?

I'd like to suggest a split verdict here. On the surface, the Talmud, midrash and tradition understand that there can be reasons where lying seems like the best choice or the only choice. But when you lie and trick and deceive, you become a רמאי (A trickster.) And there are consequences as a result. When you become a trickster, you teach your children to be tricksters, like Rivka did with Yaakov and Lavan did with Rachel (and, to a lesser extent, Leah.) It is not hard to read the deceptions of Shechem and the sale of Yosef as just desserts, “מדה כנגד מדה”, for Yaakov's earlier deceptions. When you become a trickster, you open the door for others to trick you, and justify their actions, just as Yaakov does in the Gemara in Megilla.

If you tell someone the dress makes her look great, but it really doesn't, and then she buys it, have you done her a service? Or have you put her in a position to resent the bad advice later, when she comes to her senses and realizes no one should be wearing neon green in public?

And if you tell your friend you loved the horrendous cookies she baked you, you will only have yourself to blame as she brings you plate after plate of horrendous cookies for years to come.

The truth isn't the easy road. When we're in a tough spot, we try to slide out of it the easiest way. That's human nature. But we are explicitly instructed to rise above our nature and our inner instincts. The father character in Tony-award winning musical Dear Evan Hansen was talking about raising children when he said, "It's the hard way but it's the right way."

We're not alone in that tough spot, that hard road – we have Hashem and his guidance, as Hashem told Yaakov in the dream:

“וְהִנֵּה אֲנִי עִמָּךְ וְשָׁמַרְתִּיךָ בְּכָל אֲשֶׁר-תֵּלֵךְ”

Behold, I am with you and I will guard you wherever you journey.

If we're Hashem's people, we must learn the lesson it took our forefathers their whole lives to learn: we must be honest and straightforward like Hashem, “הַשֵּׁם אֱמֶת וְתוֹרָתוֹ אֱמֶת”, no matter the circumstances.