

Haftarot Unrolled: VaYeitze

A Man of Truth

In the Haftarah of VaYeitze, the prophet Hoshea accuses the northern Kingdom of Israel of being steeped in fraudulence and dishonesty. They defend themselves by claiming that they had learned deceit from their forefather Yaakov, and that therefore it is a virtue. They point to the story of Yaakov dissembling in order to receive his father's blessing instead of Esav, and to the story of his dealings with Lavan in Aram. Their claim is that if it was moral for Yaakov to lie and cheat, it must be moral for them to do the same.

The prophet tells them that G-d is not impressed with their line of reasoning. The last verse of the Haftarah, the bottom line, states:

מִי חָכָם וַיִּבֶן אֱלֹהִים נְבוֹן וַיִּדְעֵם כִּי יִשְׁרִים דְּרָכָי ה' וַצְדָקִים יֵלְכוּ בָם וּפְשָׁעִים יִפְשְׁלוּ בָם
Whoever is wise, understand these, whoever is discerning, know them:
the ways of Hashem are straight; and the righteous walk on them,
but the crooked stumble upon them (Hoshea 14:10)

Those who are themselves crooked will find crookedness everywhere. Hashem's ways, however, are "straight", and that is what He values.

But if Hashem's ways are "straight", were Yaakov's deceptions were in line with His ways? We learn from the prophet Michah, Hoshea's contemporary, that Yaakov is associated with the trait of "Truth." Yet, the Torah tells us that Yaakov manipulated his brother into selling him his birthright, that he pretended to be Esav to mislead his father, that he negotiated a profit-sharing arrangement where he walked away with all the money, and that he snuck away from his employer in the middle of the night.

How is this a Man of Truth?

The Midrash that describes the Creation of Man questions the impact that mankind will have on the world:

א"ר סימון בשעה שבא הקדוש ברוך הוא לבראת את אדם הראשון, נעשו מלאכי השרת כיתים כיתים, וחבורות חבורות, מהם אומרים אל יברא, ומהם אומרים יברא, הה"ד (תהלים פה) חסד ואמת נפגשו צדק ושלום נשקו, חסד אומר יברא שהוא גומל חסדים, ואמת אומר אל יברא שכולו שקרים, צדק אומר יברא שהוא עושה צדקות, שלום אומר אל יברא דכוליה קטטה, מה עשה הקדוש ברוך הוא נטל אמת והשליכו לארץ הה"ד (דניאל ח) ותשלך אמת ארצה, אמרו מלאכי השרת לפני הקדוש ברוך הוא רבון העולמים מה אתה מבזה תכסיס אלטיכסייה שלך, תעלה אמת מן הארץ, הדא הוא דכתיב (תהלים פה) אמת מארץ תצמח

R' Simon said: When G-d was ready to create Man, the angels split into factions; some said, "Create him", and other said, "Do not create him" - as the verse says, "Kindness and Truth struggled..." (Tehillim 85:11) Kindness said, "Create him, because he will be kind," and Truth said, "Do not create him, because he is full of lies." ... What did G-d do? He took Truth and threw it to the ground... The angels cried out, "Master of the

Universe! Why are you mistreating Your methods? Raise it from the ground!" .. as the verse says, "Truth will sprout from the earth."(Tehillim 85:12) - (Bereishit Rabba 8:5)

According to this Midrash, mankind's existence is in conflict with Truth. G-d's solution, having created Man despite the objections of the angels, is to take Truth from up in the Heavens, and throw it down to the Earth. In order to reach back to the Heavens, it needs to grow out of the Earth.

The Midrash asserts that Heavenly Truth cannot coexist with Mankind. We can only handle an Earthly truth, one that is mixed up with the dirt and mud of our material existence. This Truth must be raised and nurtured, like a plant, in order to see the light of day. Until then, it is hidden, like a seed in the ground that is waiting for the proper time and the right conditions to sprout.

If Truth is hidden and complicated, then what is clear and visible may very well be false. Thus, a person who says what he thinks and "calls it as he sees it", is not necessarily a Man of Truth. The Man of Truth would be the one who deals with the complexity, sees beyond it to the hidden core, and exposes it for the world to see.

Yaakov was a Man of Truth. He did not deal with the world as it was, he dealt with the world as it was meant to be. The truth was that Esav was not suited to the service of G-d that being the firstborn entailed. The truth was that Esav should not have received that blessing. The truth was that Lavan owed Yaakov his salary, and the truth was that Yaakov could no longer stay at Lavan's house and needed to go back to the Land of Israel. Yaakov saw that truth and acted upon it.

When the Kingdom of Israel says, in the Haftarah, "We may be liars and cheats, but we are just like Yaakov Avinu," they demonstrate how it is possible to take the paths of G-d and twist them to justify any action. Those who are looking out for their wallets and their egos will see what they want to see. They will say that they, too, are dealing with the world as it was meant to be, but the path they think is straight is actually warped and crooked. The ability to see the hidden Truth is predicated on humility and a lack of self-interest.

At the beginning of Parshat VaYeitzei, after the vision of the ladder, Yaakov asks G-d:

וַיִּזְרַק יַעֲקֹב נֶגֶד לְאֹמֶר אֵם יִהְיֶה אֶל־לֹהִים עֲמָדִי וְשָׁמְרָנִי בַּדֶּרֶךְ הַזֶּה אֲשֶׁר אָנֹכִי הוֹלֵךְ וְנִמְנָן לִי לֶחֶם לְאֹכַל וּבָגֵד לְלַבֵּשׁ:

Yaakov made a promise, swearing: If G-d will be with me, and will guard me on the path that I tread, and will give me bread to eat and clothes to wear. (Breishit 28:20)

Yaakov does not ask to be blessed with great wealth; he asked for the minimum to live on. Therefore, all his subsequent actions were not undertaken for his own aggrandizement, but for the sake of the path that he was treading, the path of G-d, which is straight and clear, a path of Truth.

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In memory of my father, Peter Rozenberg, z"l

לעילוי נשמת אבי מורי פנהס בן נתן נטע ז"ל