

Good Deeds, Bad Consequences – Parashat Vayitzei
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“Why do bad things happen to good people?” is a question that almost all of us have been plagued by at some time. It is probably one of the most pressing theological issues of all time, one that apparently has no universally satisfying solution. Despite that, a hint of a partial answer may be found in this week’s Torah portion.

The night that our forefather Jacob has been eagerly anticipating has arrived. For seven years he has toiled in the house of Lavan for the right to marry Rachel his youngest daughter. But he is duped, and upon waking in the morning he discovers that the woman he has wed is not his beloved Rachel but rather Lavan’s oldest daughter, Leah. At this point Jacob confronts his father-in-law with angry words: “What is this you have done to me? I worked with you for Rachel! Why did you deceive me?” But Lavan is not one to back down or admit guilt. A ready answer is on his lips: “It is not the practice in our place to put the younger before the older.”

The accusation that is heard between the lines is a biting one indeed. In your place the younger may be put before the elder, but heaven forbid that we behave with such lack of propriety. And the memories of those oh so difficult events of over seven years ago flood back into the consciousness of Jacob, memories he had been trying so valiantly to suppress. How his mother prevailed upon him, the younger son, to impersonate his older brother Esau and thereby obtain from his blind and aging father Isaac the blessing usually reserved for the firstborn. How he went in to his beloved father and lied to him, answering the question “Who are you?” with the words “I am Esau your firstborn”. How his father trembled, and his brother cried out in anguish, when the treachery became known. And how his enraged brother vowed to kill him and he was forced to flee from home for his very life.

And now Jacob’s head is spinning, he is stung to the core. The past has come back to haunt him.

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This is exactly the type of thing that our ancient sages called ‘measure for measure’. He dished it out, and he got it back. The deceiver has been deceived. The younger who usurped the position of the elder, has been given the elder when it is the younger that he so greatly longed for.

But this is much more than punishment. This is tragic, for Jacob had done what he did only for the sake of heaven. His motives were nothing if not pure. He and his mother Rebecca were convinced, and justifiably so, that Esau was not fitting to receive the blessing that Isaac was liable to give him. They were certain that the future of the Jewish People depended upon them taking this radical step. Jacob betrayed his father’s confidence for the noblest reason possible.

And indeed it may well be that his lying and deception were justified...and still the consequences cannot be escaped. This is what the Talmud refers to as a “transgression for noble ends,” concerning which the great Hasidic master Rabbi Tzadok haCohen of Lublin opines that it nevertheless requires atonement. Yes, under certain very proscribed circumstances the ends justify the means. The very nature of the divinely created reality in which we live is that sometimes un-kosher means must be employed to attain the most exalted of ends. But no matter how necessary and mandated such a course of action may be, still there is a price to be paid.

Evil taints those who practice it. It pollutes those who resort to it, even when it is the most righteous path available. The impurity of death clings even to those who kill in self defense. The horrors of war haunt even those who shed blood in the most righteous of wars.

We still live in an unredeemed world in which evil must be opposed with evil. To remain above the fray is not acceptable. Jacob must fend off Esau even when it means adopting the tools of the latter’s trade. The ends do sometimes justify the means. But we still must pay the price. And we all do. We all do.



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