

Rabbi Chai Levy, Congregation Netivot Shalom, Toldot drash 11/18/23

The story of Rivka and Yaakov's deception of Yitzhak raises some moral questions that are uncomfortable to talk about. But we need to talk about uncomfortable moral questions.

Some commentaries attempt to make sense of, or justify Rivka's encouraging Yaakov to deceive his father Yitzhak by disguising himself as the hairier Esav and tricking his father into blessing him instead of his brother. Yaakov has already gotten Esav to trade his birthright for a bowl of lentil stew, and now he's tricked him out of his father's special blessing for the firstborn.

Ah, but wasn't Rivka just fulfilling God's wishes?  
She received a prophecy when she was pregnant with the twins.  
When Yaakov and Esav struggled in her womb,  
God gave her a clear message: two nations are in your womb,  
*Shnei goyim b'vitneych*, and the older shall serve the younger!

So was it moral for Rivka to direct Yaakov to deceive his blind father to get his blessing? Was it ok to lie in order to fulfill God's will? Is it ok to do something that would otherwise be considered unethical, if it's for a just cause?

This is a thorny and difficult question.

It's also a very relevant question for us today, as our people engages in war. A defensive war, against a brutal enemy who attacked us, continues to attack us, to hold our people hostage, and wants to destroy us and wipe us off the map. And a war in which our terrorist enemy uses civilians, hospitals, schools - human shields - and we, end up in the horrible position of killing and displacing civilians and children as we fight to defend ourselves and our right to exist.

I know I'm not alone in struggling with these questions of morality. Certainly there are many loud voices today – on social media, in marches and protests, in schools, in city and university statements and resolutions – that seem to have a clear answer about “ceasefire” or “no ceasefire” or what to do when Hamas is operating from a hospital in Gaza. Beyond the loud voices, slogans, memes, and protests,

I think many of us are struggling with the difficult moral questions that cannot be conveyed in slogans or posters held at a rally.

A friend posted this week<sup>1</sup>:

What do we want?! NUANCE!

When do we want it?! OVER AN EXTENDED PERIOD OF IN-DEPTH CONVERSATION!

I recently heard a story<sup>2</sup> about Rabbi David Forman, z"l. He was the founder of Rabbis for Human Rights, and I am old friends with his son-in-law, Rabbi Michael Schwartz. Rabbi Forman was a trailblazer among Israelis working for Palestinian human rights.

“David was born in America and made Aliyah as a young man filled with visionary humane ideals. His early years as an Israeli of course included military service, he told a story from his time in the IDF. He served as the commander of a tank battalion in the First Lebanon War in 1982. He had received his orders to lead his men into a battle in southern Lebanon. When they arrived, there were the terrorists, and there were the human shields deliberately placed in front of them. And David was left to decide – do I order my men to fire? If I have them fire, we will absolutely kill innocent people. If I have them hold their fire, it is all but certain that one or more of us will be killed. There is no time to decide. What should I do? David chose not to reveal the decision he made. Instead, he placed the dilemma before his audience as he shared this story. What would you do?

Rabbi David Forman, the founding Rabbi for Human Rights, said, “I didn’t tell you this story to reveal the ‘right answer’ – that is, to reveal what I did in that situation. I told the story to demonstrate something about morality that most people don’t want to accept. “You see, most of us want morality to be about choosing between right and wrong. But I have learned that moral choices are never between right and wrong – because right and wrong is easy. You do what’s right. Moral choices are between right and right... and between wrong and wrong. It is wrong to open fire and kill those innocent civilians. And it is wrong to hold fire and rob an Israeli family of a loved one who courageously put his life on the line for his family and his people. It is right to kill terrorists who declare their genocidal

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<sup>1</sup> See Shir Yaakov Feit facebook post 11/16/23 <https://www.facebook.com/shiryaakov>

<sup>2</sup> From sermon by Rabbi Ken Chasen, shared by my friend, Rabbi Michael Schwartz, son-in-law of Rabbi David Forman, z"l: <https://leobaekctemple.org/media/8fh827x/the-stained-canvas-of-morality-rabbi-ken-chasen?fbclid=IwAR07khzYBJCBInue4oDdU8RUUpoDylhHd38pZiQpdGJy4dXt21kEVJMXcKA>

intent, along with their preference to die instead of negotiating a peaceful solution. And it is right to preserve the lives of innocent people trapped by a regime that weaponizes their deaths.”

Which brings me back to Rivka.

And the question her story raises of:

Is it ok to do an otherwise unethical thing for a just cause?

Was it ok to deceive a blind Yitzhak and trick him into giving the blessing to Yaakov, because that’s what God wants?

Like Rabbi Forman, I’m not going to answer that question.

Because I think that we all have to wrestle with that question ourselves,

And my point is not to answer the question, but to say:

Moral questions are not between right and wrong, rather,

Moral questions are terribly difficult to answer.

Even though the Torah seems ok with Yaakov taking the blessing from Esav,

with Yaakov becoming our next patriarch after Avraham and Yitzhak, and

with Esav treated in our tradition as the father of our enemy, the Edomites –

Yaakov later faces the consequences of his deception:

He has to flee from Esav and they are separated for 20 years,

And he himself is later deceived in turn by his uncle Laban, and so on.

It seems to me that the Torah tells this story of Rivka and Yaakov’s deception

Not to give a clear answer to the question of: did they do the right thing?

But to raise for us the issue of moral questions,

Moral questions that have no easy answer.

The story could have been told without such a moral question -

I mean, why couldn’t Rivka simply have COMMUNICATED with Yitzhak?

She could have said: “Look, Yitzhak, I had a prophecy from God that the older will serve the younger, so please give the blessing to Yaakov.”

Why was the whole story about the deception and the fake hairiness needed?

Maybe to tell us a story about difficult moral questions.

That sometimes the answer can’t be easily stated on a poster, a social media meme, a slogan.

That sometimes, it’s not a simple binary between right and wrong, but it is a knotty, complex, painful situation with no easy answer.

That there are things that are right either way and wrong either way,

as Rabbi Forman said in his story.

Maybe the clearest image in our parasha is not  
Whether Rivka and Yaakov did the right thing, but  
The image of *the struggle* in her womb when Rivka is pregnant with Yaakov and  
Esav. “The children struggled in her womb” (Gen 25:23)

וַיִּתְרָצְצוּ הַבָּנִים בְּקֶרְבָּהּ וַתֹּאמֶר אִם-כֵּן לָמָּה זֶה אֲנֹכִי

The commentator, Or HaChaim, the 18<sup>th</sup> century Moroccan Rabbi Hayyim ben  
Moshe ibn Attar says “The meaning of the word וַיִּתְרָצְצוּ is based on the root רָצַץ,  
to crush. Since there were two fetuses in her womb she felt as if her womb was  
being crushed.”<sup>3</sup> It means: crushed, broken, exhausted.

She is in agony over this internal struggle.

It makes her question everything:

אִם-כֵּן לָמָּה זֶה אֲנֹכִי

And perhaps speaking of that crushing struggle is all we can really say with clarity  
in moments of impossible moral questions.

So many people around the world are lashing out at each other right now.  
In protests, on social media, at school board meetings, tearing down posters,  
shutting down the Bay Bridge for 6 hours, spending endless hours fighting over  
nuances of language in statements and resolutions that frankly make no  
difference to Israelis and Palestinians who are dying and mourning.

Everyone is so agitated, so activated, behaving so awfully to each other.  
Friends are distancing from each other with suspicion and a sense of betrayal.  
Allies who could be working together on shared goals have become divided as  
ideological enemies. What is going on?

The answer: We are in deep pain.

Our insides are crushed and broken, like Rivka’s,

וַיִּתְרָצְצוּ הַבָּנִים בְּקֶרְבָּהּ

And we feel the need to do something.

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<sup>3</sup> [https://www.sefaria.org/Or\\_HaChaim\\_on\\_Genesis.25.22?lang=bi&with=all&lang2=en](https://www.sefaria.org/Or_HaChaim_on_Genesis.25.22?lang=bi&with=all&lang2=en)

Rabbi Amy Eilberg, who works as a peace maker and mediator, recently wrote<sup>4</sup>:  
“Over the years, I have learned many things about what moves people to rhetorically attack all those perceived to be “on the other side” at times of conflict and deep pain. I understood this to be an intellectualized version of the “fight” part of the “fight or flight” reflex, extremely common in discourse around conflict. In more recent years, many of us have learned about this kind of belligerent speech as a response to trauma.

In this current moment of intense collective pain, I notice another element: how many of us (myself included) regularly “go to our heads,” reflexively wrestling with policy issues and attempts to predict the future, compulsively consuming more and more videos and webinars, and debating multiple organizational statements, rather than feeling the pain of what we have all witnessed and experienced. We live out the illusion that if we could just “figure it out,” find the “right” analysis or prognostication or land a fatal verbal blow on an objectionable post, then we would feel better.”

And this is really what I want to say today.

The moral questions are horrible.

The whole situation is horrible. Beyond horrible.

There aren’t words to describe how horrible it is.

We are all hurting, angry, devastated. It’s excruciating.

And there is an impulse to go to our heads, to argue, to demonize each other for having the wrong opinion, to use extreme and polarizing language, to take a side, a position, make a statement. People who have very little knowledge about the history of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict - students, celebrities, town councils, anyone with a social media account – are making polarizing statements.

And we’re doing it in response to the fact that we’re all in pain.

What if we could all just stop and be sad together?

And feel our shared humanity and our grief and our pain and our care for human beings, the children and the babies, and the future?

Like the pregnant Rivka: וַיִּתְרַצְצוּ הַבָּנִים בְּקִרְבָּהּ

What if we could just feel together the crushing feeling inside us, the brokenness, the struggle?

And admit that moral questions don’t have simple answers?

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<sup>4</sup> <https://evolve.reconstructingjudaism.org/lovingkindness-in-a-time-of-war/>

You may have noticed that we as a shul are not issuing a “statement” about Israeli policy or military strategy.

Yes, there are certainly things I think we can say with clarity:

- We should do whatever we can to bring the hostages home safely.
- Hamas is a brutal terrorist organization that needs to be defeated
- Israel should engage morally within the ethics of war and should minimize civilian deaths in Gaza.
- And that we stand against the ugly anti-semitism that is rearing its head

But we as a synagogue are not issuing a “statement” because that would only add to the polarization and weaken us and that is the opposite of what we need as a community.

We are all in deep pain. No matter our political views, I think we are all feeling that crushing, struggle inside,  
and as a synagogue, our goal is to be a place  
where we can come together in our pain,  
and feel our shared humanity and mourn and pray and hope and care  
and recognize that moral questions are those that don’t have simple answers.

Perhaps not only for our synagogue but for everyone in the world taking a “side”:  
more important and effective than polarizing statements and slogans  
is to give voice to the crushing struggle inside of us,  
And from our shared pain, rediscover our shared humanity and compassion, and  
find strength in each other and create openings to new possibilities.

Shabbat Shalom