



The lies of leadership

By Erica Brown

In the painting “Rebecca Presents Jacob to Isaac” (1768), artist Nicolas-Guy Brenet shows Isaac sitting up straight in his bed with one arm held high and his legs tangled in sheets. Isaac’s other arm is wrapped around Jacob’s shoulder, whose red tunic matches the ruddiness of his face. Rebecca stands in the background, holding up a tent curtain so she can quietly watch the scene from a distance. Isaac is old and blind but, the artist suggests, his body knows the truth and protests. Isaac’s silent movement registers deception. The son with the pelt collar designed to imitate the manliness of his older twin was not Esau.

This week’s Torah reading, Toldot, paints dishonesty with words rather than images. “‘Father,’ and he (Isaac) said, ‘Yes, which of my sons are you?’ Jacob said to his father, ‘I am Esau, your first-born; I have done as you told me. Pray sit up and eat of my game, that you may give me your innermost blessing’” (Genesis 27:18-19). Jacob requested an innermost blessing while wearing an outer layer of betrayal. Jacob said, “I am Esau.” The verse, by using names simply and lucidly, calls out the lie that would haunt Jacob for the rest of his life.

Later, Laban, his father-in-law, tricked Jacob by switching brides; Jacob married Leah instead of the love of his life, Rachel. Jacob’s sons tricked him by giving him Joseph’s striped coat dipped in goat’s blood; Jacob naturally concluded that his favorite son had been killed by a wild animal. While Joseph did not trick his father outright, Joseph’s long disappearance in Egypt without contact overwhelmed Jacob with grief. We are told many times that Jacob’s hair grayed, and he was ready for death. Joseph rose to meteoric heights of leadership in Egypt while Jacob mourned him and languished in Canaan. All of this was the consequence of one lie.

In his 2020 book *Morality: Restoring Common Good in Divided Times*, Rabbi Jonathan Sacks writes that, "Without moral commitment, the still small voice of truth is inaudible beneath the cacophony of lies, half-truths, obfuscations and evasions. Without truth, no trust; without trust, no society. Truth and trust create a world we can share." Jacob was terribly aware of this break in trust and told his mother so directly: "But my brother Esau is a hairy man, and I am smooth-skinned. If my father touches me, I shall appear to him as a trickster and bring upon myself a curse, not a blessing." Jacob and Esau were different in every way. Jacob couldn't imagine getting away with this lie nor did he want to. He didn't want to be labeled a trickster forevermore.

Although Jacob was a necessary actor in the story, it was Rebecca who hatched this deception and carried it out in detail. She demanded that Jacob hunt for meat to make Isaac his favorite dish from his favorite son. "Rebecca then took the best clothes of her older son Esau, which were there in the house, and had her younger son Jacob put them on; and she covered his hands and the hairless part of his neck with the skins of the kids. Then she put in the hands of her son Jacob the dish and the bread that she had prepared." Rebecca took the meat. She brought the coat. She put gloves on Jacob's hands and placed the food in his arms. Jacob was an adult who could have dressed himself, but in his stiff, unyielding gestures, it is as if Jacob communicated he wanted no part in his mother's plan. Why else would the Torah have gone into this level of detail to inform us what was happening backstage?

Behavioral economist Dan Ariely, in *The Honest Truth About Dishonesty: How We Lie to Everyone — Especially Ourselves*, believes that the will to lie touches us all: "...our sense of our own morality is connected to the amount of cheating we feel comfortable with. Essentially, we cheat up to the level that allows us to retain our self-image as reasonably honest individuals."

Jacob did not willingly participate in his mother's plan because his own self-image was not as a deceiver. Rebecca, however, was comfortable with this lie because God told her while she was pregnant that her younger twin would be the rightful heir: "Two nations are in your womb. Two separate peoples shall issue from your body; one people shall be mightier than the other, and the older shall serve the younger" (Gen. 25:23). A few verses later, we read that, "Isaac favored Esau because he had a taste for game, but Rebecca favored Jacob" (Gen. 25:28). Commentators fill in the gaps trying to explain these loves. Ha-emek Davar suggests that Rebecca's love was based on the higher vision she had for Jacob that God placed in her mind during her pregnancy.

We lie most often for personal benefit, what Ariely calls “rational economic motivation.” Sometimes we lie “to view ourselves as wonderful human beings” (this is the psychological motivation).” This explains many of the lies that leaders tell. They lie or fudge the truth to protect themselves or others, to maintain morale when it's low, or to facilitate a better bottom-line. Lies make life easier in the short-term but dissipate trust in the long-term. Jacob understood this all too well.

Rebecca's motivation, of course, was never for personal gain. After all, Esau was her son also. No matter how different children are, mothers want every child to thrive. Rebecca had a different agenda; she needed to make good on God's prediction. Yet every time I read this story, I wonder why Rebecca never reported to Isaac what God said about the fate of their twins. Perhaps the two could have found a way as parents to grow Jacob into his leadership role without having to snatch a birthright from Esau. It could have spared heartache for all four of them.

Trust could not be more critical now in leadership or more absent in our everyday discourse. “A world of truth is a world of trust,” writes Rabbi Sacks in *Morality*. “In it, there is something larger than individuals seeking their own interest. Truth becomes the intellectual equivalent of a public space that we can all inhabit, whatever our desires and predilections.” It's our responsibility to instill and restore trust so that it fills a public space we can all inhabit.

Think of a lie you could have told that would have made your life easier, but you didn't. Think of a lie that had long-term consequences. Consider a truth that hurt but was necessary. Each of us can erode trust through lies or build trust through truth. Our parsha reminds us that honesty is not only a characteristic. It's also a choice.

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