

Dr. Wolowelsky is Chair of Advanced Placement Studies at the Yeshivah of Flatbush and a member of the Academic Advisory Committee of Bar-Ilan University's Lookstein Center for Jewish Education in the Diaspora.

## ***KIBBUD AV AND KIBBUD AVOT: MORAL EDUCATION AND PATRIARCHAL CRITIQUES***

Some years ago, I had the occasion to speak with a father about his younger son's *yeshiva* experience. The boy was disruptive in class, uninterested in his studies, and constantly acting out. He had a good heart and an outgoing personality, but nowhere near as good a mind as his older brother, who was one of the top students in the school. I tried, rather unsuccessfully, to help the father understand that the two boys could not be evaluated by the same standards, that he should focus on the younger boy's skills and talents, and stop trying to pour him into the mold that his first son had carved out for himself. It was all to no avail.

Finally, I warned him to learn something from *Toledot*, which was then the current *parasha*. Yitshak Avinu had two sons who were raised in the same house by the same parents, who went to the same schools, and who learned the same lessons. How could one turn out to be a *tsadik* and the other a *rasha*? It was because they had exactly the same upbringing despite the fact that they had entirely different characters. Had they each had an educational program tailored to their respective individual needs, both might have turned out to be righteous.

This was the opening for which the father had been searching. Anyone who could criticize the *Avot*, he told me as he stormed out, could not know anything about Torah education.

Of course, had the man waited but ten seconds more, he would have had to confront the fact that the insight was not mine, but rather that of someone who, I believe, had an uncontested reputation as an expert in Torah education: Rav Shimshon Raphael Hirsch, Torah mas-

ter of his generation. The reason that Ya'akov and Esav turned out so differently, he wrote,

. . . may have been due not so much to a difference in their temperaments as to mistakes in the way they were brought up. As long as they were little, no attention was paid to their slumbering differences in their natures, both had exactly the same teaching and educational treatment, and the great law of education, "bring up each child in accordance with his own way", was forgotten.

. . . To try to bring up a Jacob and an Esav in the same college, make them have the same habits and hobbies, want to teach and educate them in the same way for some studious, sedate, meditative life is the surest way to court disaster . . . Had Isaac and Rebecca studied Esav's nature and character early enough and asked themselves how can even an Esav . . . be won over to the service of God, . . . who can say what a different aspect of the whole history of the ages might have been presented (*Commentary to Genesis 25:27*).

R. Hirsch is not alone in suggesting that Esav might have come to a better end. For example, Rav Zalman Sorotzkin of Lutzk placed the blame not on Yitshak's educational philosophy but on his fulfillment of his duties as a father. Yitshak was willing to give Esav the *berakhot* because he was unaware of how far Esav had turned from the true path, "having not supervised Esav as he should have" (*Oznayim laTorah, Genesis 25:27*).

Had Yitshak properly followed up on Esav's activities, he would have found that he was an idolater and perhaps have been able to bring him back to proper action, or at least not have thought to give him the *berakhot*.

Yitshak saw that Esav had turned to hunting, even though there was more than enough to eat in his home . . . but again Yitshak did not reprimand Esav, rather taking pleasure like the father who sees his son as "making money for himself and helping out his father" . . . [Then,] when Yitshak saw that Esav took wicked wives—they, unlike Esav not having the ability to cover up for themselves—he once again did not check whether his "*takhsit*" followed in their path. . . This is all an open reprimand to all fathers who . . . keep making excuses for their children and thereby let their children go astray (*ibid.*).

These critical portrayals of Yitshak, to cite only two by way of example, are more than analyses of *Humash* and Hazal. They are designed to

offer guidance to help parents avoid having to face the agony of raising an Esav. But just the same they seem to fit into the *Jewish Observer's* editorial scrutiny of the “silver-tongued preachers who hope to inspire their flocks with all sorts of homilies drawn from Bible stories, making the *Avos hakedoshim* ‘jes’ folks,’ with all the same kind of personal weaknesses and domestic problems that you and I have. Their agenda is commendable: to make us better people. But the price—in terms of cutting down Biblical personalities to ‘accessible’ size—is much, much too high” (“Approaching the *Avos*—Through Up-Reach or Drag-Down”, March 1991). The comments were openly directed at the time against some of Rabbi Shlomo Riskin’s newspaper columns on the *Avot*, but they reflect a general attitude that has gained prominence in our communities these days. Rav Hirsch seemed to have anticipated such criticism, having introduced his own comments, quoted above, with the observation that “our Sages, who never objected to draw attention to the small and great mistakes and weaknesses in the history of our great forefathers, thereby make them just the more instructive for us.”

Of course, this is not to suggest that Rav Hirsch would be prepared to sign on to all criticisms of the *Avot*. Far from it. For example, Ramban had argued that “Abraham committed a great sin in his behavior toward his wife, and even his deserting the land to which he had been directed was already a wrong in which he sinned” (*Commentary to Genesis* 12:10). Rav Hirsch takes issue with this characterization of Abraham’s actions, offering a justification based on his reading of the text. But here too he stresses:

The Torah never presents our great men as being perfect; it deifies no man, says of none “here you have the ideal, in this man the Divine became human.” Altogether it puts the life of no man before us as the pattern out of which we are to learn what is right and good, what we have to do, what to refrain from doing. Where the Word of God would set a pattern before us to imitate, it places no man born of dust; there God says “Look at me, imitate Me, wander in My ways.” We are never to say: This must be right for did not so-and-so do it! The Torah is no collection of examples of saints.” It relates what occurred, not because it is exemplary but because it did occur (*Commentary to Genesis* 12:10).

Rav Yosef Eliyahu Henkin ruled that it is permissible to interpret the non-halakhic parts of the Torah in ways differing from those of Hazal “provided the intention is to strengthen *yirat Shamayim*” (quoted in R. Yehuda Henkin, *Equality Lost*, p. 6). But it is not my purpose

here to argue for the defense of any particular criticism of the *Avot* or *Immahot*. Indeed, it is quite possible that many (if not most) would not hold up under scrutiny, or at least would allow for equally persuasive positive interpretations. I would rather focus on the educational implications of a policy of condemning any criticism of the *Avot* as beyond the limits of our community, as opposed to that of Rav Shimshon Raphael Hirsch, which he posits in the name of Hazal, that “the Torah is no collection of examples of saints.”

By way of illustration, let us direct our attention for a moment on Ya’akov’s actions in obtaining the *berakhot* from his father. His mother Rivkah, thinking that Ya’akov had intended to give the *berakhot* to Esav, instructed Ya’akov to impersonate his brother and receive them in his stead. It certainly seems that Ya’akov had acted deceitfully in dressing up as his brother and answering his father’s question “Who are you, my son” with the reply “I, Esav, your firstborn” (*Genesis* 27:18-19). Indeed, his father himself later says that Ya’akov had come “*be-mirma*, with guile” (*Genesis* 27:35).

Nosson Slifkin’s popular short book *Lying for Truth: Understanding Ya'akov's Deception of Yitzchak* (published by Yeshivas Midrash Shmuel in Jerusalem) captures the current mood advocated in the *Jewish Observer* in addressing these issues. The author, quoting various authorities who have dealt with the issue, produced a volume which, in the words of the *yeshiva*’s head, Rabbi Binyomin Moskovits, “shows those who have merited full faith in the holiness of the *Avot* how they were punctilious in all their pure deeds” (Preface). “Remembering that he [Yitshak] was a spiritual giant,” the author writes in his own introduction, “we shall not criticize him on the basis of Western values. Rather, we shall apply a Torah-based analysis, from which we can determine what our values should be.”

The book begins with a description of the importance of truth in a Torah perspective. As fundamental a principle *emet* (truth) is, and as dangerous a matter is *sheker* (falsehood), “there are occasions when it is necessary to ignore the prohibition against lying” (p. 45). Such an occasion is bringing peace among people; we all know, for example, that it is not always correct to answer the question “How do I look” with complete honesty. More important, “If a murderer is chasing a potential victim and he asks you which way he went, is it *emes* to tell him the correct answer? . . . To point in the wrong direction is to be loyal to that which is ultimately true and real.” Thus, quoting *Mikhtav me-Eliyahu*, “Yaakov’s deception was consistent with true reality. At a higher level, it *was* truth” (pp. 50f).

Whether or not receiving the *berakhot* was important enough goal to merit putting aside the prohibition of lying is a reasonable question that can legitimately argued from both sides, and we shall return to that discussion anon. Before that, though, there are two additional issues to consider, the first being how Ya'akov knew that attaining the *berakhot* was a case where the ends justified the means.

The answer, cited from *Or haAfeila*, lies in the fact that Ya'akov deceived his father on instructions from his mother:

Rivka had received a private prophecy that the elder child would serve the younger child. She was told that it was part of Divine plan for Yaakov to receive the *berachos*, and she considered it necessary to take whatever steps were required to bring this about. As a prophetess, it was her prerogative to determine when certain *mitzvos* have to be ignored temporarily in order to achieve certain goals, a decision that Yaakov was duty-bound to obey (p. 32f).

The second issue concerns the many sources of Hazal that say that Ya'akov was punished “measure for measure” for the pain he had caused Esav, a statement that certainly suggests that, as he was punished, he must have done something wrong.

*Lying for Truth* offers a different interpretation of Ya'akov's suffering, quoting Rav Moskovitz that “. . . even if Ya'akov had to do as he did, he still had to receive atonement for any pain caused in the process of reaching his goal” (p. 43). Indeed, this is a very significant moral lesson: often a price must be paid for doing the *right* thing. To offer our own example, while it might be right for a destitute person to steal the medicine his child needs to survive, he nonetheless will have a debt to pay when the theft is discovered.

I have quoted extensively from Rav Hirsch in this discussion for two reasons. First, Rav Hirsch's standing as a *gadol baTorah* is, I should hope, unassailable, and it is therefore important to see how insistent he is in rejecting the approach typified by the *Jewish Observer's* editorial. Second, it is a valuable backdrop for reading how *Lying for Truth* quotes Rav Hirsch's explanation of Rivka's course of action:

Rav Shimshon Rafael Hirsch, *zt"l*, takes an entirely different approach. . . . Yitzchak had been fooled by the wicked Eisav into thinking that he deserved the *berachos*. Even when Eisav married two Hittite women, Yizchak still did not catch on. Rivkah was aware of her son's true nature, and we can be sure that she made numerous attempts to con-

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vince Yitzchak of the truth, but to no avail. Yitzchak simply didn't believe that he could be fooled that easily.

Now at the eleventh hour of desperation, Rivkah decided to bring home her point in a stronger way. She would play a simple trick on Yitzchak, nothing sophisticated and something certain to be discovered. For the discovery was the point—to make Yitzchak realize that he had been fooled after all . . . . Yitzchak finally realized how mistaken he had been all along (p. 41f).

This suggestion, whether or not it can be disputed, is surprising in that a presentation geared to protecting the *kavod* of the *Avot*, so to speak, should offer an explanation based on the belief that Yitshak, himself a prophet and spiritual giant, should be so easily fooled by Esav and be so out of touch with reality that he would plan to give the *berakhot* to his evil son instead of the one who actually deserved it. More important, though, Rav Hirsch is quoted here as part of a defense of Ya'akov's actions without a hint that he himself, taking an opposing viewpoint, would be one to write the following:

As we repeatedly remarked, we follow the opinion of our sages and do not consider it our task to be apologists for our great men and women, just as the Torah itself never refrains from informing us of their errors and weaknesses. If Rebecca brought it about that Jacob deceived his father, it says quite unequivocally “your brother came *be-mirma*, with guile” (*Genesis* 27:35) . . . . But if quiet thoughtful considerations of this event force one to conclusions that would remove a great deal of bitterness, we do not think that we should refrain from giving them in order to avoid our appearing as apologists. Enough will still remain which cannot be approved of, especially when measured against the yard-stick of character of a nation whose name of honour is *yeshurun*, which is only to achieve its purpose in the “straight” (*yashar*) way, and is to oppose any crooked means for any purpose (*Commentary to Genesis* 27:1).

But the main difficulty with this explanation of Rivka's strategy lies neither in its painting Yitshak as easily fooled (if not in dotage) nor in its less-than-forthright conscription of Rav Hirsch into the camp of Ya'akov's defenders. It is rather the substance of the subsequent *berakhot* that Ya'akov received when Yitshak was fully aware of whom he was blessing.

It turns out that Yitshak was not at all taken in by Esav. Rivka's concern was, in the end, misplaced. Addressing his son as he takes his leave, Yitshak blesses Ya'akov as follows:

And God *Sha-dai* will bless you, and make you fruitful and multiply you, that you may become a company of peoples. And He will give you the blessing of Abraham to you and your seed after you, that you may inherit the land of your sojournings which God gave to Abraham (*Genesis* 28:3-4).

Yitshak never intended to give the blessing of the Abrahamic faith and land to Esav, either when Ya'akov was masquerading as his brother or when Esav himself appeared before his father. Had everyone had confidence in Yitshak's perception and sense of responsibility, Ya'akov would have received the *berakhot* without any machinations or deception. (This is most important, for, to return to our previous analogy, while it might be right for a destitute person to steal the medicine his child needs to survive, it cannot be justified if there is a free clinic nearby giving out the medicine to all who merit it.)

To be sure, Ya'akov and Rivka had to come to a moral decision based on the information available to them at that time. Without knowing what Yitshak would eventually do, and drawing reasonable (although ultimately incorrect) conclusions from the way Yitshak acted towards Esav, the deception might indeed have been justifiable, even though it involved Rivka's most disrespectful assumption about Yitshak. But given the Torah's ultimate revelation that they had in fact miscalculated, their action cannot be justified on the basis of Rivka's status as a prophet.

This is, I think, a good point to turn to an easier question not directly related to our reading of the *Avot's* actions: how should children be taught to respond to their parents' misdoing? Clearly, the halakha requires that children be aware that parents can be wrong—witness the requirement that children disobey their parents if their requests contradict halakhic requirements. But that halakhic principle does not translate easily into an educational policy. In a normal healthy family, the requirement to create a sense of submission to parental authority sometimes demands that children do as they are told “because I said so.” As the child grows older and can understand that parents can be fallible and yet wonderful, not perfect but nevertheless worthy of love and commitment, they can begin to compare their parents' actions to an outside standard, that of the halakha. Yet this too is more complicated than it appears on the surface. For example, any person who is involved in *kiruv* knows the importance of family ties and allows that to temper advice on the pace at which one should move to full halakhic observance.

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Even when it is clear that a parent's actions cannot be justified or tolerated, the obligations that flow from the *mitsvot* of honoring and fearing one's parents moderates the way one can talk to and about one's mother or father.

If one sees that his father is violating a Torah law, he should not say to him, "You have violated a Torah law." Rather he should say, "Such and such is written in the Torah," as if he is asking a question of him, rather than reprimanding him, and he will understand the truth by himself and not be embarrassed (*Shulhan Arukh Yore De'a* 240:11).

This, in fact, is how Rav Hirsch explains Ya'akov's protest to Rivka that if his deception will be discovered by his father, "I will be in his eyes as a deceiver, *ke-mitate'a*, and I shall bring a curse upon me, and not a blessing" (*Genesis* 27:12).

"*Ke-mitate'a*," as a cheat, as one who would deceive somebody. This "*ke-* [as]" explains everything. Jacob was no cheat and did not want to deceive . . . . But thereby he also told her, indirectly and in a most respectful manner, how objectionable the whole affair seemed to him, as a deception meriting being cursed (*Commentary to Genesis* 27:12).

While Ya'akov succeeded in this regard, he did not, in Rav Hirsch's view, rise to the standard of disobeying orders that contradict halakhic values:

Right from the beginning his mother appealed for blind obedience to her orders . . . [and] cuts all objection short by exercising her maternal authority, and appealing to his duty to obey the orders of his mother . . . . So what Jacob did was only out of obedience to his mother, and his behavior can only be blamed inasmuch as the duty of obedience of children too is limited by the laws of morality, when one may not practice any deceit even out of obedience to one's mother (*Commentary to Genesis* 27:1).

It is easy to justify two adult siblings discussing among themselves how their parents' actions hurt them and should not be repeated in their own families' lives. It is very hard, on the other hand, to justify their talking about the matter on a TV talk show, especially when the focus on what was troubling them overshadows, if for no other reason than its sensationalism, the awe and love that they might nevertheless maintain for their parents.

How, then, should one address the question of the *Avot* in school, given that “The Torah never presents our great men as being perfect; it deifies no man, says of none ‘here you have the ideal, in this man the Divine became human’”? Clearly, the elementary grades in which young students first encounter the *Avot* is not the place to undermine the “hero-worship” appropriate for our ancestors who encountered God at levels incomprehensible to ourselves. But teenagers are another matter.

High school students are regularly evaluating their own and others’ ethics. Their reasoning skills are constantly being sharpened, and recognizing inconsistencies—in others, but not necessarily in themselves!—a hallmark of their adolescence. There may be cultures that require suppressing articulating such observations, but that silence should not be misunderstood as obliviousness to what is noticed. Thus, to take our case as an example, it will not be missed by most students that if Rivka was right, Yitshak is irresponsible in his would-be choice of Esav as his spiritual successor. If Yitshak knew all along that it was Ya’akov who would get the *berakhot* of Abraham’s legacy, including *Erets Yisrael*, than Rivkah could not have been directed by prophecy to deceive him, and Ya’akov was unjustified in listening to her. And so on.

Indeed, the only way to avoid this is, on the one hand, to keep juggling enough ethical and textual balls so that the student never focuses on the inconsistencies and, on the other hand, to dismiss as unprincipled anyone who would dare criticize the Patriarchs or Matriarchs. But this requires even additional gymnastics, for one must hide from the student the criticisms that Hazal—from the *Midrash* to Ramban to Rav Hirsch—felt necessary to articulate, going so far as to misrepresent those who criticize the *Avot* as being their defenders and characterizing Torah principles as “Western values.”

More important, if one succeeds in this campaign, there is the danger of driving home a very dangerous message: the means do justify the ends if the cause is just. Hopefully, we all cringe when, to cite a not inconceivable example, a “*frum*” criminal is exposed in the newspaper as embezzling or laundering money for *yeshivot* or the like. Our embarrassment, though, is not due simply to the fact that an Orthodox person is guilty of fraud. As a community, we have nothing to be embarrassed about in ethical “contests” with those further removed from Torah values. If we cringe, it is because we sense that the robbery is somehow being presented as done *in the name of Torah*, and because we know that the criminal might well suffer little if any negative consequences in our community.

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But *Hazal* apparently had something else in mind in their willingness to criticize the *Avot*. It is not that the *Avot* were “jus’ folks” with everyday foibles, but that *even* the *Avot* were fallible. If *even they* could misread a situation, then *we* certainly could. If *even they* must pay a price for a misaction, then *we* certainly will not be excused our sins because we felt the cause was just. That is why the Torah was *mohel al kevodam* to show us their faults. As Nehama Leibowitz comments,

Our Sages were very exacting in their standards where the Patriarchs were concerned. If they found their conduct wanting, they had no qualms about drawing attention to it. They indicated, too, that the righteous man was eventually punished for his fault, emphasizing where it was recorded in the narrative, and they did not excuse him (*Studies in the Book of Genesis, Va Yetse* 6).

Of course, this is no invitation for a free-for-all criticism of the *Avot* of the type characterized by, say, Bill Moyer’s *Genesis* PBS-TV series of a few years ago. Too many of the well-meaning people in the series had little respect—let alone awe—of the *Avot* and, armed with various clichés of current pop-psychology, treated us to some condescending discussions of the patriarchal “dysfunctional family.” Our criticisms, in contrast, must rather flow from our respect for *Hazal* and stated in their name, creating an awareness that the Torah makes us aware of these faults in order to help us meet its standards, not ours.

I first learned of Rav Hirsch’s criticism of Yitshak’s educational policy by reading it on the wall of a yeshiva principal’s office. It was there for all to see, so that teachers, parents, and students not fall into the trap of forcing each student into the same mold. It was powerful and respectful, a notice to all of the Torah’s expectations for those who would raise and educate children. I wish that father with whom I had spoken years ago had seen it. It would have made it harder for him to masquerade as respect for the *Avot* his own inability to confront his personal failures.