Truth or Consequences: Thoughts for Parashat Toledot

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By
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Angel for Shabbat, Parashat Toledot

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Hans Christian Anderson wrote a classic tale about an Emperor who took great pride in his clothes. Several clever swindlers convinced the Emperor to buy a most wonderful outfit—one that only stupid people would be unable to see.

The Emperor sent advisers to view the new regal attire—which in fact consisted of nothing at all. The advisers were too embarrassed to admit that they couldn't see the garments. They praised the new clothes to the Emperor, who then tried them on himself. He also couldn't see them, but didn't want to admit this since he did not want to be deemed to be stupid.

The Emperor dressed in his new clothes and led a parade through town. The townspeople were too ashamed to admit that they couldn't see the clothes, because they did not want to be thought to be stupid. At last, a child looked up at the Emperor and shouted spontaneously: "Look, the Emperor has no clothes." Everyone, including the Emperor, knew that the child was right; but the Emperor continued with the procession comporting himself with as much dignity as he could muster.

Truth is a troublesome thing. It shatters illusions. It can be abrupt and unpleasant. But once one realizes the truth, one should accept it and act accordingly. Instead, so many—like the Emperor in the tale—continue as though they never heard the truth. They have too much invested in their illusions and falsehoods. It costs too much emotionally to give up on mistakes or to admit errors in judgment.

Spin doctors do their best to make falsehood appear to be truth. P.R. specialists promote the illusions and make the public think they will look stupid if they deny these illusions. At last, someone cries out: "The Emperor has no clothes." But that

voice is ignored or silenced. Folly marches on.

Rabbi Moshe Chaim Ephraim (1748-1800), a grandson of the Baal Shem Tov, wrote a Torah commentary—“Degel Mahanei Ephraim”--drawing on many of the teachings of his illustrious grandfather. He offers an interesting comment on an anomalous word usage in this week’s Torah portion.

When Esau is born, the Torah states “and they named him Esau”—they, in the plural. When Jacob is born, the Torah states “and he named him Jacob”—he, in the singular. Why the discrepancy?

Rabbi Moshe Chaim Ephraim, drawing on classic rabbinic Midrashim, suggests that Esau and Jacob symbolically represent two opposite qualities. Esau is the embodiment of falsehood; Jacob is the embodiment of truth. Esau is named in the plural, because many people are attracted to falsehood. Jacob is named in the singular, because only rare individuals are attracted to truth.

But how can that be? Doesn’t everyone crave truth? Don’t all people repudiate falsehood?

The problem is that we live in a world where it is difficult to distinguish between truth and falsehood, where things are subject to interpretation. Was Don Quixote a madman, or was everyone else insane? Or was there truth and madness on both sides? Who is to decide what is really true and what is genuinely false?

Wise people know that truth and falsehood, like Jacob and Esau, are twins. But they also know that they need to work hard and think clearly to distinguish between the two. Most people are inclined to believe whatever they want to believe, whatever is convenient to believe, whatever is politically correct to believe, whatever they are told to believe. Few people are inclined to cut through the omnipresent static of falsehood, especially when exertion for truth can exact a heavy personal toll.

The late great psychiatrist, Dr. Silvano Arieti, once described a dilemma he faced. He dealt with patients whose grasp of reality was very weak. Patients thought they were kings or queens, that they were all powerful. As long as they lived with these illusions, they were actually happy. To “cure” them would entail the undoing of their fantasies, making them face a reality which was far less pleasant than their world of illusions. While each case and each diagnosis needed to be dealt with on its own terms, Dr. Arieti’s basic belief was that human dignity ultimately needed to be based on truth, not on illusions. Even if truth is more unpleasant than falsehood, the pursuit of truth is a basic human ideal.

“The Emperor has no clothes!” These words pierce through the illusions and propaganda and political correctness that engulf us. The many will ignore or deny these words. The few will listen, will face the truth, and will maintain their dignity and the dignity of humanity.

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