

IS IT SO SIMPLE TO BE SIMPLE?

THE SOURCE

GENESIS 25:27

The children grew up and Esav became a man who knew hunting, a man of the field, and Yaakov was a simple man who sat in the tents.

וַיִּגְדְּלוּ הַנְּעָרִים וַיְהִי עֵשָׂו אִישׁ יָדָע צֹד וַיִּשְׁב אִישׁ שָׂדֵה וַיִּעֲקֹב אִישׁ תָּם יֹשֵׁב אֹהֲלִים.

Discussion Question

When the Torah describes Yaakov as a simple person, is that a form of praise or criticism?

Discussion Question

When Yaakov steals the blessings, his own father describes the act as cunning (b'mirmah). Was Yaakov simple or was he cunning?

Discussion Question

At the Pesach Seder, the third son is the Tam, the simple son. How does he compare to Yaakov?

Discussion Question

If Yaakov acted deviously towards his father and brother, why is he known for his honesty-אמת (Micha 7:20)

Insight #1

Every character trait has positive and negative aspects and we must learn to find the proper balance, depending on the person and the situation.

Rambam, Hilchot Dei'ot chapter 1&2

Insight #2

We all have natural inclinations that can steer us in different directions. Life's challenge is to overcome any inclinations which prevent us from achieving our goals.

The Vilna Gaon, Commentary to Mishlei 4:13

Insight #3:

Yaakov was an "ish tam," a simple person, with the emphasis on the word "ish," which implies mastery over being simple. His tendency was to be simple, but when necessary, Yaakov was also able to be shrewd.

R. Simcha Bunim, Chedvat Simcha, Toldot

Digging Deeper: Pick a character trait (e.g. happiness, anger, patience). Can you identify various situations where this trait can be positive or negative?

Digging Deeper: Can you think of examples of the different ways in which Yaakov left his natural comfort zone to achieve his goals? How might this apply to his inclinations towards simplicity and honesty?

Digging Deeper: How does the Tam that we meet at the seder differ from the Torah's description of Yaakov as "ish tam"?

CASE STUDY

At Josh's school, cell phones are only permitted when classes are not in session. Josh has a phone and as a service to his fellow classmates, he leaves it in his locker for anyone to use. His friends appreciate his service but warn him that he could get into trouble if someone uses it during class time. Josh would like to think that his classmates are trustworthy, but he doesn't want to get into trouble. What should he do?

Is Josh being naïve or innocent? How would you relate the insights we learn from Yaakov to help Josh solve this problem?

STORY

A story is told of a king during the times of Moshe Rabbeinu who wanted to know what made Moshe such a great leader. He hired an artist to draw a portrait of Moshe so that his character traits could be studied by experts. The experts analyzed the portrait and concluded that Moshe had terrible character traits. Dissatisfied, the king decided to meet Moshe face to face. Upon seeing Moshe, he realized that the portrait was, in fact, accurate. He asked Moshe why the experts assumed that he had terrible character traits. Moshe answered: I am naturally inclined to the traits you described, but I have learned to overcome them.

Tiferet Yisrael, Kiddushin 4:77

Additional Texts for Further Exploration

At that moment [when Esav found out that Yaakov received the blessings] Esav began to scream: Come and see what this "tam" did! [He is "tam"] as the Torah states "And Yaakov was a simple man (tam) who sat in the tents." Is it not enough that he made a fool of me about the fact that I sold the birthright? He now took my blessings!

Devarim Rabbah, Devarim no. 1

באותה שעה התחיל עשו צווח ואומר
בא וראה מה עשה לי התם הזה שכתוב
בו ויעקב איש תם יושב אהלים לא די
שצחק לי על שמכרתי לו את בכורתי
והנה עתה לקח ברכתי.
דברים רבה, דברים א פרשה א

Why do you think Esav was bothered about Yaakov's simplicity after hearing about the blessings?

Those who think that one can swindle or fool the simple are mistaken because one who is simple in the path of truth is a worthy opponent to any cheater. Yaakov, our forefather, about whom the Torah testified that he is a "simple man who sat in the tents," and who embodied the trait of truth, as it states "give truth to Yaakov," was a worthy opponent to Lavan the cheater in his swindling.

**R. Yechezkel Sarna, Haggadah Shel Pesach Chevron,
Knesset Yisrael**

טעות הוא ביד אלה החושבים כי אפשר
להונות ולרמות את התמימים, כי זה שהוא
תמים באמת, אח הוא לכל רמאי, יעקב
אבינו שהתורה העידה עליו שהוא איש
תם יושב אהלים ומדתו היא אמת, וכמו
שכתוב תתן אמת ליעקב, אח הוא ללבן
הרמאי ברמאותו.

**הרב יחזקאל סרנא, הגדה של פסח
הברון כנסת ישראל, עמ' קיז**

What made Yaakov the worthy opponent of Lavan, the master swindler? Was it his honesty and simplicity or was it his ability to be shrewd?

There is an important principle for us to reveal regarding the concept of "tam" (as mentioned at the seder). You may know that one who is called "tam" is in fact slightly lacking in something. The true, perfected individual is called "tamim." ... Don't be mistaken by the fact that Yaakov is described as "Yaakov was a simple man (tam) who sat in the tents" because he was still lacking at that time. When did he become "tamim"? When he defeated [the angel].

Rashba's Commentary to the Haggadah

הנה עיקר גדול יש לנו למסור בסוד
הנקרא תם. וכבר ידעת כי הנקרא
תם החסרון דבק, והשלם והאמיתי
נקרא תמים ... ואל יטעך מה שבא
ביעקב ויעקב איש תם יושב אהלים
כי עדיין היה בו קצת חסרון.
ואימתי נעשה תמים כשהשיג ונצח.
פ' הרשב"א על הגדה של פסח

Does Rashba's perspective on being simple differ from the other perspectives mentioned in this discussion?

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We'd love to hear your feedback on the Shabbat Table Discussion Project. Please be in touch at shabbattable@yu.edu