

When the End Justifies the Means

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A rabbi is presented with a golden opportunity, literally. A member is eager to make the largest single contribution in the synagogue's history; and we're talking about a congregation that has received some lavish endowments over the decades. The donor understandably wants his family's name to be emblazoned on the sprawling synagogue's main building.

The rabbi, though, recognizes that he has been presented with a challenge. The donor is a nationally known business leader, often criticized for his labor practices and especially for alleged disregard for the environment. Living several states away, he has clear-cut more California redwoods than anybody in history. Liberal voices in the congregation do not want this man's name on their synagogue, and they're willing to forego the money in the process.

For the rabbi, though, and for much of the lay leadership, the money represents much more than dollars and cents. The potential gift offers the opportunity to renovate the sanctuary and to endow Jewish education at the Temple for generations to come.

The rabbi investigates the charges against the business man and he looks to the sources of our Jewish tradition. Our sacred texts are clear: If the money is ill-gotten, it cannot fund a sacred purpose. But those time-honored rabbinic rulings don't speak to earning a living legally in ways that are ethically troubling to many but not to others. Instead, the sages forbid taking the proceeds of a robbery to build a synagogue or Jewish school. The businessman-donor may be a latter-day John D. Rockefeller, but he is no Meyer Lansky!

In short, the question before the rabbi is whether the means by which the potential donor earned his wealth are so reprehensible as to disqualify those funds from sacred purpose. Perhaps he could look to this week's Torah portion for guidance.

Isaac has grown old; and he thinks he's about to die. He is eager to give his choicest blessing to his elder son, in accordance with law and custom. With a taste for game, Isaac sends that elder son, Esau, to go hunting, and then to come with a meal, at which time Isaac will bless him. Rebekah, Isaac's wife and mother

to both of their twin sons, Esau and Jacob, overhears Isaac's instructions. Some of our ancient rabbis and medieval commentators say she's eavesdropping, while others say she gets word from an Angel. If the messenger is divinely dispatched, this wouldn't be the first time Rebekah receives revelation about her sons. During her pregnancy, distraught by the pain she suffers as the twins' rivalry erupts in her womb, Rebekah is comforted by God's word: The older shall serve the younger. Rebekah knows the intent of the Eternal One: Jacob needs to receive that blessing, not Esau.

Rebekah quickly instructs a reluctant Jacob: Go to the barn, slaughter a sheep. Then, while I cook it up how your dad likes, use the sheep's skin to dress up like Esau, hairy all over. Your dad is pretty much blind; he won't know the difference. And if he does, let any punishment fall upon me; the plan is all mine.

Jacob, whose very name means "heel," behaves, well, like a heel. He simply does as his mother instructs, without regard to the ethics of deceiving his father and stealing his brother's blessing.

What happens when Jacob goes in to see his father is even more interesting. Isaac asks, "Which of my sons are you?" Even the question hints that Isaac knows better than to assume that the man standing in front of him, hot meat meal in hand, may not be Esau. Jacob replies, "I am Esau your first-born . . . eat of my game so that you can give me your heartfelt blessing." Isaac, though, isn't so sure, beckoning his son closer, so he can examine by touch. Isaac's verdict: "The voice is the voice of Jacob, but the hands are the hands of Esau!" Isaac asks one more time, and Jacob repeats that he is indeed Esau. Finally, Isaac eats, and provides the blessing to the son who stands before him.

Our sages struggled mightily with this passage, just as the modern rabbi of my earlier story questions the propriety of receiving that charitable gift. On the one hand, the rabbis of old are not troubled by the result: The son chosen by God – which is to say, the "correct" son – receives the blessing. The end of the matter is laudable, just as a renovated sanctuary and endowed Jewish education are good. But what about the means? Is the blessing ill-gotten? Or is Isaac a willing participant all along, merely pretending not to know that he's giving the blessing to the younger son he cannot bear to name openly as deserving of that choicest benediction?

Plenty of hints suggest that latter conclusion – Isaac makes plain that he’s not sure that Esau is standing before him, even declaring that the voice is Jacob’s. The 20th Century Mussar master, Rabbi Eliyahu Dessler, takes the analysis deeper.

Dessler writes, “The hands represent the external actions of a person, while the voice represents a person’s inner essence.” As a child, Jacob is referred to as “a tent dweller,” who stays inside, which Dessler interprets as a person who is inwardly-focused. When Isaac says that the voice is Jacob’s, he is saying that he wishes to bless the son whose heart is pure. At the same time, Jacob’s hands are rough as he stands before Isaac, symbolizing his vile actions, deceiving his father to steal his brother’s blessing.

In the end, Dessler is convinced that Isaac knows which son he’s blessing, namely the son who needs the blessing and can benefit from it. His intentions are good, but his actions do not yet reflect those intentions. Dessler argues that a blessing can only affect externals; the characteristics of the human soul are immutable. Dessler is, after all, a Mussar teacher, and the purpose of Mussar is to bring out in our actions what we already know is right. Jacob knows what is right; he just isn’t doing what’s right at this point in his life.

Ultimately, as Rebekah has already been told through prophecy, “the elder shall serve the younger.” Dessler interprets this not to mean that Esau will serve Jacob – as it turns out, though Jacob gains the birthright and the blessing, Esau is never his servant. Instead, Dessler says that “the elder serving the younger” means that “Esau’s hands,” meaning the wicked actions of Jacob’s youth, will be subjugated to “Jacob’s voice,” that inner purity that Jacob possesses throughout his life.

So now, let’s return to our modern rabbi and his prospective donor. The donor’s hands are surely “Esau’s,” roughed up by callous treatment of his workers and of the world that God has granted to us. But what of his “voice,” that inner spirit? My senior colleague, the rabbi to whom the donation was offered, had known this donor over many seasons. Perhaps he saw in him a basic, inner goodness not reflected in his public activities. Would bestowing the blessing have the same effect on the donor that Isaac’s has on Jacob?

Isaac’s younger son ultimately transcends the behavior that marks him as a “heel,” and his name is changed from Jacob to Israel, one who struggles with God and prevails. That rabbi I told you about? He accepted the gift, a blessing to the donor, whose name now adorns the exterior wall of that synagogue, in an

architecturally tasteful way. The wall is white, and the name is carved into that white wall, with no color. The letters are large enough, but still only visible upon careful examination. Perhaps the format bespeaks the humility that the rabbi hoped to confer upon the donor.

When does the end justify the means? When the blessing makes all the difference.

Amen.