

Paul Newman, Richard Burton, and Marlon Brando

Vayishlach - Rabbi Herb Cohen

When I was an English graduate student many years ago, I was enamored with the plays of Tennessee Williams, the celebrated Southern playwright. Many of his plays were turned into popular movies, and as a student I was struck by the appealing lead actors, which included Paul Newman, Richard Burton, and Marlon Brando. The central figures in these dramas were all people who were seriously flawed, and perhaps even corrupt. But, they were engaging characters who evoked audience empathy.

I asked my professor at the time why Williams' protagonists were so appealing even though they embodied moral deficiency. He quickly responded: "That's the point. Williams is telling us that immorality and moral turpitude can be seductive and attractive to us, and we have to be able to see beneath the surface when judging others. We should not be fooled by appearances."

I thought of this comment as I reviewed this week's Torah portion of Vayishlach, in which the character of Lavan figures so prominently. Lavan, the duplicitous brother-in-law of Jacob, has a name that belies his character. Lavan in Hebrew means "the white one." Conventional literary imagery relates white with virtue and black with evil. However, this conventional imagery does not operate here. The Bible is an instructional manual for living and it is reminding us not to judge a man by externals. As it so aptly states in the Ethics of the Fathers, "do not look at the bottle but at what is inside of it." What counts is inward character, not outward appearances.

Interestingly, the Bible suggests a remedy if one finds himself in close proximity to evil. The Torah relates that Jacob informs his messengers to tell Esau that "I have sojourned with Lavan and lingered until now." There is a secret implied in this message. The Hebrew word for "sojourned is garti, which numerically equals 613, taryag, the number of commandments in the Torah. The hidden message is that although I have stayed with Lavan for a long time, I have



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retained my commitment to Torah in spite of my surroundings. Keeping the faith has enabled me to withstand the temptations and corruption around me.

Two messages emerge from the parasha: don't be fooled by appearances, and staying true of one's principles will protect one from being corrupted.



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