

Flatterer's Folly (Vayishlach)

“Flattery is all right if you don't inhale.” -Adlai E. Stevenson

Some twenty years earlier, Jacob had pretended to be his brother Esau and deceived their blind father to bestow blessings on him that had been originally intended for Esau. Esau, intensely offended and enraged, intended to kill Jacob at the right opportunity. Their mother Rebecca, understanding the danger Jacob was in sends him away to her brother Laban's care, far away from Esau's reach.

However, now, twenty years later, Jacob intends to return home and can't avoid crossing paths with Esau. Jacob sends word ahead to Esau, calling himself his brother's servant. After sending the message it says Jacob was very fearful (Genesis 32:7).

Rabbi Shlomo Ephraim of Prague, the Kli Yakar (1550-1619) explains that the source of Jacob's great fear was because of the implied flattery. The Kli Yakar then quotes the Talmudic dictum:

Rabbi Elazar says: whoever flatters his friend, in the end will fall in his hands. -Tractate Sotah 41b.

So apparently Jacob had much to fear in his encounter with Esau. By seeming to unduly flatter Esau, Jacob had set himself up to potentially fall victim to the harm he was trying to avoid. Thankfully, he came away relatively unscathed from the encounter, though subsequent encounters between the Children of Israel and the descendants of Esau have often been less than pleasant.

While it is nice to say a kind word, we should make sure not to confuse it with unwarranted flattery.

May we be spared from undue flattery and likewise spare others the same.

Shabbat Shalom,

Ben-Tzion

Dedication

To the memory of Staff Sgt. Eitan Rosenzweig hy”d of Alon Shvut.