



# The Collective Conversation

*Weekly Torah Essays from the  
Young Israel of Scarsdale Community*



**Sefer Bereshit**

**Parshat Vayetzei**

**Kislev 5782 / June 2021**

## Lavan and Anti-Semitism

By Russell Mannis

In this week's *Parsha*, Yaakov struggles to establish a life for himself and his family in the house of *Lavan*. In the *Haggadah*, our sages portray *Lavan*'s designs toward *Yaakov* as potentially more destructive to the Jewish people than those of *Pharaoh* "for *Pharaoh* issued a decree only against the males, but *Lavan* wanted to uproot everyone." Elevating the severity of *Lavan*'s sly deception toward *Yaakov* above the murderous actions of *Pharaoh* seems hard to reconcile. Moreover, how does *Yaakov*'s experience, though personally challenging and even at times traumatic, rise to the level of a national threat worthy of such a citation by our sages in the *Haggadah*?

*How does Yaakov's experience, though personally challenging and even at times traumatic, rise to the level of a national threat?*

The answer seems to be borne out by our history. For all the overt traumatic episodes in our national past — from Egypt to Purim to the Crusades to pogroms and ultimately the Shoah —where the threat we faced was all too visible, the more common setting has been the long stretches of history where the threat we faced was just below the surface. We were never quite sure how welcome we truly were. Like *Yaakov*, who brought great fortune to *Lavan*, Jews were tolerated and even welcomed for the contribution they made to society. But history has taught us that the welcome was conditional and temporary because the same kind of moral depravity that drove *Lavan*'s cruelty to *Yaakov* provided the fuel for anti-Semitism throughout the ages.

In his book, *Towards Historic Judaism*, Rabbi Eliezer Berkovits wrote: "Anti-Semitism is there not because of what Jews are but because of what anti-Semites are. It is a symptom of a moral disease in the character of men." (Berkovits published *Towards Historic Judaism* in 1943, it was the first of several books trying to make sense of the role of God and humanity in the holocaust.)

The importance of internalizing this pattern in our national history perhaps explains why *Lavan*, the archetype of moral depravity, infamously commands such a unique place in the *Haggadah* as a reminder and a warning that anti-Semitism in its most insidious forms can "uproot everyone."

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**Russ** and Bonnie have been members of the Young Israel of Scarsdale for 34 years

## One more thing

Inspired by, *The Tree of Life and Prosperity* by Michael A. Eisenberg. Eisenberg, a NY-born Israeli venture capitalist, writes about the intersection between Torah and economics.

Chayei Sara (24:18,20)

וַיֹּאמֶר שְׁתָה אֶذְנִי וַתִּמְהַר וַתֵּר בַּקְהָה עַל־יִצְחָק  
וַתִּשְׁקַהוּ  
וַתִּמְהַר וַתֵּעֶר בַּקְהָה אֶל־הַשְׁקָת וַתִּרְצַץ עוֹד אֶל־הַבָּאָר  
לְשָׂאָב וְתִשְׁאָב לְכָל־גָּמְלִיוֹ:

*“Drink, my lord,” she said, and she quickly lowered her jar upon her hand and let him drink.*

*Quickly emptying her jar into the trough, she ran back to the well to draw, and she drew for all his camels.*

Vayetzei (29:2)

וַיַּרְא וְהִנֵּה בָּאָר בְּשָׂדָה וְהִנֵּה שֶׁם שֶׁלֶשֶׁת עֲדָרִים־צָאן  
רְבָצִים עַלְיָה בַּי מַרְהַבָּאָר הַהָוֹא יִשְׁקוּ הַעֲדָרִים וְהַאֲבוֹן  
גָּדְלָה עַל־פִּי הַבָּאָר:

*There before his eyes was a well in the open. Three flocks of sheep were lying there beside it, for the flocks were watered from that well. The stone on the mouth of the well was large.*

Parshat Chayei Sara describes a well that is open and freely accessible to all who want to draw from it. This is in sharp contrast to the description of the well in our Parsha: **הַאֲבוֹן גָּדְלָה עַל־פִּי הַבָּאָר**. The stone on the mouth of the well was large. The well in Vayetzei was not freely accessible. What changed?

Eisenberg frames the explanation in terms of Game Theory.

In Parshat Chayei Sara, the shepherds trusted each other and were not concerned that one of their group would deplete the water supply. Trust allowed them to leave the well open and available.

Just two parshiot later, the level of trust had deteriorated markedly and the shepherds feared that the first to arrive at the well would water their flock and not be concerned about the others who would come later. Indeed it's likely that they placed the stone at the head of the well precisely because at one time or another, each of them arrived to find the well dry. The solution they implemented — the stone that was moved only in the presence of all — was based on a reasoning technique known to us as Game Theory.

Game theory — in this case, in the form of a puzzle called, The Prisoners Dilemma — is all about how people reach an optimum outcome without communicating directly. Rabbi Sacks, who was also fond of using Game Theory to uncover a message in the Torah, describes it this way. “Start by being nice to your opponent, then do to him what he does to you (*middah kneged middah*). [But if you] always do to him what he does to you ... you may [find] yourself locked into a mutually destructive cycle of retaliation.” The solution Rabbi Sacks concludes is that the players “learn to cooperate.” And cooperation requires trust.

Our parsha demonstrates that the spirit of cooperation and level of trust had declined so much that the shepherds implemented a form of regulation — the stone — to ensure that water was available to all. Regulation and laws are used to achieve an optimal outcome when there is no trust.

Using Game Theory as a prism, Parshat Vayetzei is a treatise on what life is like when there is no trust.

*Want to write or dedicate a Parsha essay?*

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**The Collective Conversation** is a project of the Young Israel of Scarsdale and the YIS Living Torah Fund

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