

Parshas Vayetze - 5781

The *parshah* this week is filled with tension. Yaakov is on the run from his brother Esav who wants to kill him. He arrives by his uncle, Lavan, and finds no relief. Every interaction they have carries with it conflict. Lavan is a ruthless and evil father-in-law, boss and overall human being. When Yaakov had enough, he consults with his wives and the decision is made to leave Lavan's home and Yaakov, with his family, would return home. This decision creates more conflict since Yaakov did not inform Lavan that he was leaving and taking his family with him. Furthermore, Rochel took Lavan's idols. When Lavan is informed of what transpired he sets off to catch up with Yaakov. Lavan tracks him down and searches for his idols. When he can't find them, Yaakov tells him off. However, considering all of the potential outcomes that could have occurred in this showdown, it is relieving that Lavan proposes a treaty. As with all good things Jewish, they have a feast to mark the formation of the treaty and then go to sleep for the night.

Lavan gets up early the next morning and says his goodbyes and then the Torah informs us that וישב לבן למקומו – and Lavan returned to his place, ויעקב הלך לדרכו – and Yaakov went on his way, ויפגשו בו מלאכי אלוקים – and Hashem's angels encountered him. At first glance it seems that there is nothing significant going on here. It is just the Torah's report about what happened the morning after they made their treaty. Lavan goes back to his place and Yaakov packs up the kids in the Green Monster (undoubtedly, Yaakov had a 15-passenger green van to transport everyone). However, if you stop for a moment and think about it, it is actually difficult to understand. Firstly, why does the Torah tell us that they each went on their way? If the Torah did not report this explicitly, would we think that they remained there until they died? What is even more troubling is the disparity in how the Torah describes Lavan's next move and Yaakov's next move. We are told that Lavan "returned to his place," whereas Yaakov "went on his way." The Torah tells us about Lavan reaching his destination but for Yaakov we are told about his journey. Recall that Lavan pursued Yaakov דרך שבעת ימים – a distance of seven days. He wasn't simply in the neighborhood and would return before *mincha*. It would take a number of days before he would reach his home and yet the Torah doesn't address his journey, just that he returned to his place. Seemingly, the Torah should tell us about both of their journeys or both of their destinations. Why address Lavan's destination and Yaakov's journey?

Rav Meir Simcha of Dvinsk, the author of the *Meshech Chochmah*, explains that the Torah is not recounting historical events just to complete the story. It is revealing to us the fundamental aspect of their respective personalities and the essential difference between Yaakov and Lavan. Lavan is described in terms of his place, whereas Yaakov is described in terms of his journey. Lavan was blessed to have Yaakov and his family live

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with them for twenty years. During the time Yaakov was living in Lavan's house, Lavan experienced blessing which clearly resulted from Yaakov's righteousness and even acknowledged that blessing (30:27). One would think that witnessing Yaakov's righteous behavior and being keenly aware that he was blessed due to Yaakov's presence would change Lavan for the better. And yet, וישב לבן למקומו – Lavan returned to his place. He was not moved at all by what happened and remained fixed in place, just as wicked as he was from the outset. The essence of Lavan is that he is not growth oriented. He is who he is with no interest in growth and becoming a better person.

In contrast, ויעקב הלך לדרכו – Yaakov continued his journey. Yaakov was someone who was always in a mindset of growth. He realized that life is about the journey, it is not about the destination. It is no accident that the *pasuk* that tells us that Yaakov returned to his journey concludes by informing us that Hashem's angels encountered him. Yaakov's constant efforts to grow and develop led him to reach such a lofty spiritual level that he had an encounter with Hashem's angels. Although in last week's *parshah* we were informed that Yaakov was a יושב אהלים, someone who sat in the tent, seemingly indicating that he was static and not growing, that is not the case. Rashi informs us that the tents where Yaakov sat were the tents of the *bais midrash*. In other words, he was learning and developing his character. Since his initial training involved growth, even when he left the *bais midrash* and lived Lavan's home for so many years, he remained with that mindset and was always on a journey of growth. In fact, the *gemara* in Berachos (64a) declares that Torah scholars do not experience rest (מנוחה) in this world or the world-to-come. The very nature of Torah scholars is to be growth oriented and focused on the journey, rather than arriving at a particular destination. They are always seeking opportunities to grow.

The Torah recounts this fundamental difference between Yaakov and Lavan to have us reflect on our lives and our attitudes. The *yetzer hora* whispers in our ears that we can be complacent and not concern ourselves with further growth. "We invested time and effort earlier in our lives and at this stage of our lives, how much difference is it going to make anyways?" We have to remind ourselves that our spiritual legacy is to be חולך בדרך – someone who is on a spiritual journey, seeking to grow and become better. We have to ask ourselves, what we can do to become better people? What can we do to daven better? What can we do to increase our knowledge of Torah?

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