

## Vayetzeh - Rabbi Lerner - November 28, 2011

### Yaacov's Flight from Charan

Lavan was a scoundrel, a cheat, constantly guilty of Genaivas Da'as. Yaacov has had a very difficult life at the hands of his father-in-law, and he decides to take flight in a deceitful manner.

31:1: Yaacov hears the words of Lavan's sons, with their saying that Yaacov has taken that which had belonged to their father, and had amassed a great wealth. Yaacov had an enormous herd of spotted and speckled sheep.

31:2: Yaacov sees that Lavan has changed his attitude towards Yaacov, being unfriendly, feeling that Yaacov is somehow cheating him.

31:3: Hashem tells Yaacov to return to his father's home. Why does Yaacov need this command, if he already detected the coolness and changed attitude of Lavan? Because he was sent by his parents and told not to return until he hears from them. It wasn't until much later that Rivka sends Devorah to tell him to return when Yaacov is already en route. Here Hashem overrides the command of his parents and tells him it is time to return.

31:4: Yaacov talks to his wives, convincing them to go with him to a foreign land. Why does he summon them to the field to have this conversation? **Ramban**: he was very frightened and concerned that if the word leaks out that they are planning to flee, he will be killed. He wanted to be out of sight and sound of anyone who might spill the details of their secret plan to escape. After 22 years, he was planning on taking his wealth, his wives, his children, knowing full well that this might ruin Lavan; he cannot take a chance on the secret being discovered, so he takes them to the field.

31:5: He tells them that firstly their father is angry at him and it will be bad for all of them; furthermore, God had confirmed to him that it was now time to return. **Abarbanel**: Why does God have to tell Yaacov that He will be with him in 31:3? Because Yaacov was greatly afraid of Lavan, and would not have made this bold step without God's reassurance that He will be with him. Yaacov told his wives that they will be successful because God will be with them.

31:6: Yaacov says that he worked very hard for their father and he changed the terms of his employment a hundred times. **Ramban**: This is a technique seen infrequently in the Torah, where vital information is relayed only in passing. Here Yaacov tells his wives information that we did not know before, that Lavan had reneged on the bargain so many times, but God did not permit Lavan to harm him. Whenever Lavan saw that things were not going his way, he made a new deal. Initially what they agreed upon was that the spotted and ringed sheep would belong to him; then he kept on changing to different appearing animals every time Yaacov was successful with more sheep being born in Yaacov's favor. This all happened not because Yaacov figured out some kind of scientific breeding success - it was a pure miracle from God; it was not because of his genius; it was what God wanted.

31:10: **Ramban**: Lavan initially thought that Yaacov could only pull off this trick in the mating season - that if the sheep would see certain patterns, they would give birth to similar animals. So Lavan realized that it would be smart to change the conditions of their deal right before the animals delivered, rather than when they mated - that way he figured he would outsmart Yaacov who used some scientific trick when they mated. He thought that in this way he would undo all of what Yaacov had done, changing the deal right before they were born; but Hashem protected Yaacov by changing the appearance of the animals at birth.

## Yaacov stands up to Lavan

When Lavan pursues Yaacov, he makes a number of accusations at Yaacov. Part has to do with Yaacov running away at night without informing him, claiming this was not appropriate behavior, leaving with his entire family without allowing the opportunity to say good-bye.

**Abarbanel:** by stealing away under the cover of darkness, he is admitting to having done something wrong, something immoral; by the flight at night (as opposed to the Jews who Hashem insisted leave Egypt in bright daylight, *Be'etzem Hayom*) it suggests that he is unethical, like a thief. He claims that Yaacov stole away with all of his wealth under cover of darkness. This suggested he was not an honest person. He uses this against Yaacov. Finally, he accuses Yaacov of stealing his gods.

31:36-42: After Lavan's search proves fruitless, Yaacov for the first time explodes and voices his feelings of anger. He gets into a heated quarrel with his father-in-law. He asks where is the evidence that he accuses him of stealing from him - did he find anything that was stolen after searching through all of Yaacov's belongings? It was 20 years that he worked for him; he never ate from Lavan's flocks; he never took a single animal for food, even though he was entitled; there was never a miscarriage; he would bear the loss of any animal that died. He served him 20 years, with Lavan changing the conditions 100 times. Only because of God did he not leave empty handed.

This conversation becomes extremely important, even though it is not specifically about mitzvohs. Normally a paid watchman is not responsible for complete accidents, only for negligence. Yaacov was a paid watchman who is responsible if an animal is stolen or killed - for those things Lavan would have had appropriate grievances; but Yaacov even paid for acts of God beyond his control - these things he should not have been responsible for; but Yaacov went beyond the letter of the law. He did not sleep at night, he stayed out in frigid weather to guard the sheep. With this conversation, Yaacov is regarded as *Po'el Tzedek*, the righteous worker. The way Yaacov has defined the work ethic is how we are supposed to carry on in our work.

**Rambam:** if one is working for an owner, you should not cheat him out of time you should be working; if you start with wasting a little time, it will grow into a large amount. Our chachamim were very particular with our time because it was what Yaacov told his wives, that he worked with the utmost care. The Rambam takes this principle straight from Yaacov's conversation here, rather than from Gemorrah - this defined the proper work ethic. This is what is expected - you give all of your time and you do not cut corners. Here it was not a lesson of what happens to the fathers is a sign for us - here it was a lesson to us of what it is like to be a worker - he is the righteous worker. When Lavan's sons start saying that Yaacov stole their fathers wealth, he was still very wealthy; he could have been wealthier so they were resentful. Yaacov was certainly not a shady character as they claimed.

**Midrash Tanchuma:** the merit of doing work with serious dedication transcends even the zechus avos. A person should not think he will have a nice easy life and not work hard, that others should support him or maybe God will support him. You cannot rely on miracles or on God taking care of you. You have to earn your living - it is a proud and admirable thing to be able to work successfully for a living and not depend on others.

**Ralbag:** a person needs a profession, even if it seems to be beneath his dignity; he should take a lesser job rather than go on welfare role. Take a look at Yaacov, the most perfect of the patriarchs. He was the intellectual who wanted to study Torah and religion - he did not want to

be out in the fields with animals day and night; but to support his family when there was need, it was not beneath his dignity to take on the profession of a shepherd. Yaacov decides early on not to be a freeloader - he told Lavan he would work for his room and board. Chazal say it is often good to take a profession that is foreign to you so that you can honestly support yourself.

This idea is very foreign to those nowadays who would prefer to sit and learn as long as they can without seeking a profession. There is a debate amongst later sages where this idea creeps into seforim. In **Tiferes Shlomo** written by Rev Shlomo of Rodensk, he says that Lavan created enormous demand on Yaacov in terms of work load because he attempted to uproot Judaism completely - it wasn't just when he pursued Yaacov at the end of the story with the possibility of slaughtering them - God put a stop to that. But it wasn't just at the time when Lavan sought to uproot all. He wanted Yaacov to become weakened in his learning with all of the work, and with a weakened resolve, he will slowly abandon spiritual things and Judaism. So, to combat this type of attack on Judaism, the concept arose that wherever possible, the descendants of Yaacov would try as hard as they can, persisting as long as they can to remain within the tents of Torah. This became the attitude in Chasidic circles, where they will stay in yeshiva their entire lives with many children; this tradition has continued for generations, creating tremendous burdens on society. This seems to be contrary to the work ethic of Yaacov. Those who champion this approach say that you are a better Jew by staying in the tents of Yaacov. Others say it is wrong to take this approach; and they also learn from Yaacov the importance of work, even taking jobs beneath one's dignity; take any kind of job, even if not glamorous - there is nothing undignified in putting in time and effort and excelling in what you do. The major part of the idea of *Po'el Tzedek* is that whatever you do, you should do well and be proud of your work. It is a very important ethic. A simple orderly in a hospital can be cheerful with *derech erez* while moving patients around - one can make a tremendous difference in other's lives. There are therefore two diametrically opposed ideas that are learned from the life of Yaacov.

Yaacov is considered to be the *Po'el Tzedek* - he did everything right. He is *Emes*, he represents absolute truth. *Emes* is found in Torah - Torah represents God's mind and values. Yaacov who studies the Torah and the values of Torah is truth. How do we reconcile this with the Yaacov who uses devious means to produce the sheep he needed? One answer is that he didn't do it - as the **Ramban** said, he succeeded only because it was what Hashem wanted. Others suggest that Yaacov used his great wisdom, and these methods helped to some extent. Was this underhanded - was it against the idea of *Ish Emes*? In Tehilim and Yeshiyahu it says "*with the pious one act piously; with the wholesome one act wholesome; with the crooked one be crooked.*" So doesn't Yaacov's actions undermine his being an *Ish Emes*? By outsmarting him, does Yaacov stoop to Lavan's level? Lavan is the ultimate con artist, the man with the name of Lavan (white) when he is as black as can be internally. Is that what we should stoop to? Should we descend into the dirt with him? According to some meforshim, this is what Yaacov did, and we defend it by saying that this was self-defense. When one comes to kill you, you arise and kill him first. If you are going to be cheated, you pre-empt him. You don't wait for the enemy to attack first. If someone is aggressively evil, you are obligated in Jewish law to attack them first so that other innocents aren't harmed. We don't commit criminal acts; self-defense is commendable. It does not just apply to being physically harmed; it applies also to those who would hurt us financially. If one is stealing from us, in self-defense you are allowed to do it to him. You can lie to a pack of liars. Yaacov is the model for this as well - *Ish Emes* as well as

*Po'el Tzedek*. Truth means to be smart in the world, to be street smart. When you deal with the evil ones, Emes demands you use their means to beat them at their own game.

The idea of resorting to dishonest means in self-defense is also dangerous and is subject to a lot of abuse. We in the Orthodox world suffer from this, when Jews do many illegal things in business and in dealings with the government. They justify this by saying that all is fair in business. Some of this came from a legitimate source, but have been abused. In European countries Jews were persecuted and down trodden - we had no choice in those lands in order to avoid discrimination to be less than honest. That was the world back then, but that is not the world in the United States. Bringing dishonesty into a society of equal laws for all, a society built on honesty, is terribly wrong and a violation of Torah law. If non-Jews are not abusing us, they are not to be taken advantage of. It is a tremendous Chilul Hashem. We must learn to discriminate in our choosing the actions of Yaacov to do what is right.

The parsha ends with Yaacov meeting the angels of God, and he calls the camp of God Machanayim - two camps. It means that Yaacov, who in galus has gone through so much and survived and thrived, the Torah captures that by showing the camp of angels fusing with his camp. God wants us to be angels, but we are living in a dangerous world. We can become angels if we avoid the minefields. The **Rav**: The greatest achievement of human beings is to be human beings; to combine the physical and spiritual worlds together; in that way we have it over the angels, being spiritual and physical and combining the two to overcome the pitfalls of the wrong derech. That is greater than being an angel.