



YOUNG ISRAEL OF GREAT NECK

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The Parsha in Practice

When the Tent Walls Fall

After years of no communication at all, Yaakov sends his first message to his brother Esav. One can imagine how many drafts this message may have taken to get just right. Too aggressive? Too passive? How does one strike the right tone with a brother who had - years earlier - promised to kill him?



Yaakov spends most of his message describing the vast gifts that he had sent to Esav in his diplomatic effort and implies that there is more where that came from, but to start the message, he offers information which seems unnecessary: *עַם-לָבָן גִּרְתִּי וְאַחַר עַד-עַתָּה*, "I stayed with Laban and remained until now."

It's not clear why Esav needed to know where he had been and it is more than likely that he had known that already. After all, Lavan was their uncle and you would imagine that he had heard that Yaakov had escaped there. Rashi offers two explanations as to why this statement was important. Either that Yaakov was implying that he had been staying with Lavan, was still a "Ger", a stranger, and was not yet even independent or settled. This would show Esav that the blessings of Yitzchak that he had taken from him clearly didn't work.

Rashi's other well-known explanation emphasizes the word *גִּרְתִּי* and notes that its anagram is *תרי"ג*, and that: *עַם לָבָן גִּרְתִּי וְתַרְי"ג מִצְוֹת שְׁמַרְתִּי וְלֹא לְמַדְתִּי מִמַּעֲשֵׂי הַרְעִים*, "though I have sojourned with Laban, the wicked, I have observed the *תרי"ג מצות*, the 613 Divine Commandments, and I have learned naught of his evil ways."

At first glance, Rashi's two explanations could not be further from each other. Yaakov was either highlighting his material **de**pendance or was emphasizing his spiritual **in**dependence. Why would Rashi bring these two opposing ideas?

I'd like to suggest that these two ideas complement each other. Yaakov stressed his dependance on Lavan as proof the blessings of Yitzchak had not taken hold. Lest Esav claim that the blessings didn't yet take because of Yaakov's lack of spiritual effort, he clarified that indeed, he was the same Yaakov as he always was, but still did not merit the actualization of the blessings and so, he reassured Esav, there's nothing to worry about.

Looking more closely, I believe there is a deeper idea here as well. The Pesikta offers an expanded understanding of Yaakov's claim.

אמר יעקב אבינו קיימתי כל התורה, חוץ מכבוד אב ואם, חוץ מפריה ורביה, עם לבן השלמתי תר"ג מצות, מנין גרתי

Yaakov was celebrating that while living in the house of Esav, he was finally able to complete the **full** course of the 613 mitzvot, adding the mitzvah of Kibbud av v'Em (for having listened to his mother Rivkah in escaping to Lavan) and Peru u'Revu, the mitzvah of establishing a family.

To the Pesikta, Yaakov wasn't just expressing how he had kept up the standard that he had set in his parent's home, but how he had even surpassed it. Staying with Lavan, there were new opportunities afforded to him in his journey toward becoming a "whole" Jew.

The two ideas in Rashi now meld together beautifully as one. Perhaps Esav had long claimed (as many have since) that the religious and studious "Ish Tam," who dwelled in sheltered and comfortable tents, had no place in the real world. "It's easy to be devoted and religious when in the confines of the home, but let's see what you look like when you get 'out there' in the world!" he may have said. Yaakov indeed does get his chance to prove that he wasn't just capable of maintaining his spiritual focus, but instead was celebrating the fact that he had even grown as the opportunities of the outside - dwelling with Lavan - afforded him the ability to embrace new mitzvot and integrate more of his personality into his religious being.

Yaakov didn't only flourish at Lavan by becoming a parent and fulfilling the wishes of his parents by living there. He also became a devoted shepherd, an employee, a cattle owner, and all while suffering from the duplicity of a difficult boss and complicated family situation. Throughout all this, his guiding principles remained intact and he remained the "Ish Tam" even when far from the sheltered tents he had once called home.

This was ultimately the message that Esav needed to hear. Esav had rejected the path of Yaakov and perhaps had seen it as impractical and unrealistic. To learn and preach in the tents is easy, but what about when those sheltered tents give way to the harshness of the real world? What then? Is life simply about keeping mitzvot **in spite** of our surroundings? To barely keep our spiritual heads above the raging waters of assimilation and religious challenges? Is the "real world" just a "worst-case scenario" for religious living?

After all those years away, Yaakov's response was an enthusiastic NO! He hadn't just maintained his religion. He didn't just survive, he thrived. He found mitzvot he hadn't yet encountered, situations he'd never navigated, and personalities he'd never experienced. All of those added to his new, and improved, religious personality.

We don't live in the tents. We live with Lavan. Do we simply maintain? Do we find opportunities with which to flourish? Ultimately, Yaakov's message to Esav was that the former Ish Tam was now on Esav's turf. And he was even better for it.

Shabbat Shalom!

Shmuel Ismach